



DVIC DM-SD-04-09976

Manning their assault amphibious vehicle personnel (AAVP7A1), Marines from Headquarters Company, Regimental Combat Team 1, assemble as a convoy at a dispersal area prior to crossing into Iraq.

Iraqi forces attack . . . prematurely. . . . Commanders are briefed, targets assigned. We are prepared to execute the quick start option or the base plan; 3d MAW is ready to roll.²⁰³

Before long Conway received another order from CFLCC establishing D-Day and H-Hour for 1800Z on 19 March, when the air war would start. Ground operations were to start two days later, on 21 March.²⁰⁴ Now everyone knew that war was hours away. The word was passed that there was a high probability of Iraqi missile strikes during the night of 19-20 March. Many Marines had their gas masks and chemical protective suits staged for a quick run to a shelter from their sleeping mats, but nothing happened during the night.²⁰⁵

The I Marine Expeditionary Force's war started the next day, 20 March, with an unexpected bang. At approximately 0725Z, there was a sound like that of a low-flying jet, followed by an explosion that shook the ground, and then by a tall gray-brown plume of smoke, about 200 meters north of the perimeter of Camp Commando. The very first effect was that it interrupted a staff meeting, General Conway and his

principal staff members were in a briefing tent near the point of impact; they all dove under the tables.^{206*} Other members of the I MEF staff wondered if the plume was poison gas, and if it was a terrorist attack, there had been no warning. Most reached for their protective gear, and NBC monitors swung into action. There was more than a little bit of confusion as Marines tried to figure out where to go and what to do. Many took shelter in the "Scud bunkers," the inverted concrete culverts and sandbag concoctions, but the combat operations center continued to operate. As many Marines sat jammed in the bunkers, with gas masks on, the word was passed to go to the highest NBC protective state (MOPP IV). Four Cobras were scrambled to scout for possible enemy attackers on the ground. By 0825Z it was clear what had happened and the "all-clear" had been sounded, but there were many more missile-raid alerts throughout the day, announced by the siren/loud-speaker combination known as "the Giant Voice." By

*I MEF Rear continued to function during the strike. As a result of the attack, I MEF Forward accelerated its preparations to move away from Camp Commando and, ultimately, into Iraq.



DVIC DM-SD-04-10906

Marine M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks with Company C, 1st Tank Battalion, line up and prepare to meet the enemy near Safwan Hill, Iraq, during the opening moves of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

one count, some 13 alerts had been sounded.^{207*}

By now CFLCC had received its answer from CentCom and was free to attack into southern Iraq to secure the oil fields. Coalition Command passed the order to its subordinate commands to attack at 1800Z on 20 March, not on 21 March as CFLCC had ordered earlier.²⁰⁸ (In General Conway's words, on account of "intel indicators that Iraqis had begun to destroy oil infrastructure, I MEF attacked into Iraq early.") It was around this time that General Mattis called Colonel Joseph F. Dunford, the commander of the lead element, and asked him how soon he could attack. Colonel Dunford asked for a few minutes to poll his staff, but soon came back with the answer—four hours. In fact, Regimental Combat Team 5 (RCT 5) was ready to go in three hours, and that is what they did.²⁰⁹

At 1512Z, I MEF released the execute order, and on 20 March at 1742Z, which was 2042 local, RCT 5's tanks crossed the border into Iraq in the dark, about nine hours ahead of the last regularly scheduled time. Instead of an attack at dawn, the regimental combat team was attacking at night, a much more complicated evolution, especially for a large, reinforced formation that was going into combat as a team for the

*The missile was most likely a Seersucker antiship missile, which literally flew under the air and missile defense radar, which is why there was no warning before the attack. It is not clear whether the warhead detonated; sources differ on this point. A Patriot antimissile battery brought down at least one other missile on 20 March. (I MEF Sitrep 191800Z to 201759ZMar03, copy in Reynolds Working Papers, MCHC, Quantico, VA).

first time. It was quite an achievement. When his troops crossed the border, General Mattis' official comment was "Tally-ho!"^{210*}

It was only later that the Marines learned that during the night of 19-20 March, the United States had begun the war by hitting select targets in Baghdad, an unplanned bomb and missile strike at Saddam Hussein and his entourage, who, according to American intelligence, were spending the night in a bunker at a place called Dora Farms, a residential compound in south Baghdad. The report turned out to be false; a somewhat shaken Saddam Hussein soon appeared on Iraqi television vowing defiance. What was clear was that this was not an early start to the Coalition's long-planned air war. The timing of the missile attack on Camp Commando on 20 March suggests that the attack, and those that followed, was in retaliation for the Dora Farms attack.

What Dora Farms and CFLCC's images of burning oil wells did was breathe new life into the old debate about the separation between G-Day and A-Day. The CFLCC request for permission to attack early amounted to a request to reverse the order of G-Day and A-Day. When CentCom granted CFLCC's request, it was official: "rock and roll" for G-Day, wait one for A-Day. That left the relationship between air strikes

*A related stimulus was an erroneous Central Intelligence Agency report that the Iraqis had moved a brigade of T-72 tanks into place near Safwan, just north of the border. This caused division to make an additional shift in its plans to accommodate the heightened threat of enemy armor. (I MEF sitrep 201800Z to 211759ZMar03, copy in Reynolds Working Papers, MCHC, Quantico, VA)



JCCC 030305-M-2237F-011

Veterans of combat missions over Afghanistan, two AV-8B Harriers from Marine Attack Squadron 542 taxi past each other on the runway at Ahmed Al Jaber Air Base, Kuwait, as they prepare for interdiction strikes against pre-planned targets in Iraq.

and ground attacks within I MEF's own sector. It is fair to ask whether there was to be any separation between them, and the answer was, not much at all, apparently for the same reasons. The Marines simply liked synchronicity, whether the context was the Iraqi theater as a whole or just the Marine battle space. As D-Day approached, the plan was for the 3d Marine

Aircraft Wing, along with Marine artillery, to strike some targets in zone hours before the infantry went over the top. A variant of the plan called for even greater simultaneity, with a "spike" of close air attacks during the first day of the ground war. In either case, the guiding principle was coordination between wing and division, and everyone knew that.

Marines assigned to Battery I, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines, prepare to fire their M198 155mm howitzers against the Iraqi 51st Mechanized Division and III Corps Artillery defending the Rumaylah oilfields.

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As General Amos had written on 19 March, the “synchronization of major muscle movements is complete.”^{211*}

On 19 March, the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing had started attacking Safwan Hill, the high ground on the border between Iraq and Kuwait, which was a great observation point for the Iraqis, and was flying over the 5th Marines when they crossed the border into Iraq late on 20 March. On that day, the first full day of war, the wing flew 259 missions, 24 in support of CFACC, and 235 in support of I MEF, shifting its emphasis somewhat from generally “shaping” the battlefield to “preparing” specific objectives that division was about to assault. The arrangement with Coalition Forces Air Component Command was clearly working as the Marines intended. It is worth quoting the dry language of the wing’s command chronology to get a sense of its activities on 20-21 March:

Maintained constant airborne CAS [close air support] coverage in support of RCT 5 . . . Maintained constant F/W [fixed-wing] FAC(A) [forward air controller (Airborne)] coverage for both RCT 5 and RCT 7, to enable interdiction of enemy counterattack or reinforcing elements. Conducted F/W counter fire in support of RCT 7 . . . Began . . . effort in earnest against Iraqi 2d echelon forces, focusing on enemy indirect fire and SSM [missile] assets. . . . Shaping MEF battle space . . . Focus on MRL [multiple rocket launcher], artillery, and reinforcing armor in Al Amarah and Basrah areas . . . Provided 8 F/W sorties to conduct CAS in support of UK forces engaged in Al Faw . . . Pushed . . . units forward to commence establishment of FARPs at Safwan and Jalibah.²¹²

The last item does not look particularly dramatic on paper, but the words belie an impressive accomplishment. Ultimately, some 4,000 ground personnel from the wing crossed the berm and, according to plan, set up some 15 small air bases and support points in Iraq. The concept was not new, but the scale was, as was the speed and flexibility of execution.²¹³ There were some dramatic, even heroic, moments for the support Marines who made it all happen. One of the most memorable interviews any field historian conducted during the war was that of Gunnery Sergeant Melba L. Garza, the operations

*1st Marine Division planners considered the air war and shaping in the I MEF area of operations to be two separate issues. For the most part, the targets in the “shock and awe” air war were far from that area of operations.



Photo courtesy of 15th MEU

With surrendered Iraqi soldiers near the port of Umm Qasr at a safe distance, a machine gunner with Battalion Landing Team 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, carefully guards the prisoners before turning them over to special handling teams.

chief of Marine Wing Support Squadron 271. She recounted, in a deadpan voice, her memories of traveling north in one of the long convoys of support vehicles, which included a number of fuel tankers. These slow-moving convoys stretched literally for miles along the few highways through the desert. When the convoy was ambushed by Iraqis on the ground, there was not a great deal that any one individual, especially someone like an operations chief armed with a 9mm pistol, could do about it except hope that the accompanying Cobras would be able to deal with the enemy, that is, until the Cobras ran low on fuel and the support Marines decided to do some “hot” refueling on the spot so that the Cobras could stay in this particular fight until it was over. Refueling is normally done in a controlled environment, after the aircraft powers down. If time matters, it is all right to refuel “hot,” while the blades are still turning. But there is no practice for refueling under fire. To say the least, this group of Marines redefined the term “hot.”²¹⁴

Within about 11 hours of crossing the line of departure, RCT 5 had seized most of its initial objectives. This was largely because the division was so well prepared and coordinated on many levels. A look at fire support coordination from an artilleryman’s perspective suggests only some of the complexities:

During . . . the “Opening Gambit,” the opportunity for fire support coordination to break down was at its greatest. Consider managing a fire support coordination line shift, a battlefield coordination line . . . shift, coordinated fire lines

. . . shifting up to seven times, opening and closing multiple keypad variations of up to six different killboxes [the map grids used to coordinate fires], coordinating numerous no-fire areas . . . and managing a restricted target list of over 12,000 targets all within a matter of 12 hours. [At the same time there was coordination] . . . with a counterobservation post program of fire, breaching operations, three regimental combat teams attacking at separate times. . . two counterbattery programs of fire, one counterarmor program of fire, attacking high-payoff targets of opportunity . . . a transfer of control between the division main . . . and division forward . . . and deteriorating weather conditions.^{215*}

On the same day, 21 March, the rest of the Marine division, as well as the British division, poured through the breaches in the border installations between Kuwait and Iraq on their way north, while the “official” air war, the “shock and awe” phase, finally began over Baghdad with the obliteration of a carefully chosen set of targets. The world watched on live television. This was certainly an impressive display of precision targeting and pyrotechnics that lit the night sky and offered one very fine photograph opportunity for the news services. Some of the resulting photographs of Baghdad in flames will symbolize the war for years to come. But it did not spark an uprising, and the regime did not collapse.²¹⁶

Back in the south, there was sporadic fighting, some of it sharp and deadly, which continued into 22 March, when RCT 7 engaged isolated pockets of resistance in the Marine area of operations. One of the first Marines to be killed in Iraq died in one of these firefights. He was Second Lieutenant Therrel S. Childers of 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, who was hit

*In this war, many artillery missions, like counter-battery fire, were largely computerized and completed in a matter of seconds.

when Iraqi fighters in a civilian pickup truck attacked his unit in the oil fields. But by and large, the Marines were pleasantly surprised by the relatively light resistance they encountered, which was much less than they had expected or feared. The local Iraqi command, the *51st Mechanized Division*, had ceased to exist in any recognizable military form, and there were already hundreds of apparent deserters in civilian clothes fleeing to the west on 21 March. While some of the Iraqi wells near the border with Kuwait burned brightly after being sabotaged by their owners, there were also instances of Iraqi oil company employees waiting patiently for the Coalition forces to arrive, after carefully following the instructions for preventing sabotage in the CFLCC leaflets that rained down from the sky.* Overall, there was far less destruction to the oil infrastructure than many had feared. That was the good news. The bad news was that the oil infrastructure had not been maintained for years and was in terrible shape. By the end of the day, with most of I MEF’s initial objectives having been seized, the division was getting ready to turn them over to the British. The official relief in place occurred without incident on 22-23 March. When reporting the relief, division added the note that after receiving information about possible Iraqi infiltrators in American uniforms, General Mattis had “directed all division Marines to remove their moustaches as part of the . . . effort to distinguish Iraqi infiltrators.”²¹⁷

With the British now protecting its right flank, the division could now turn west, moving in the same direction as Task Force Tarawa, which had rolled through the breach and crossed into Iraq on the early morning of 21 March and moved toward the town of Jalibah, paying special attention to Jalibah Air Base, where I MEF was soon to place its forward headquarters, and the key terrain at the small city of An Nasiriyah.

* This was later touted at a Coalition Forces Land Component Command briefing attended by the author in late March.

Chapter 5

The Bridges of An Nasiriyah

The heart of An Nasiriyah is something like an island between two waterways, the Euphrates River on one side, running roughly northwest to southeast, and the Saddam Canal, which runs more or less parallel to the Euphrates on the other, eastern side of the city. An Nasiriyah controls the bridges over both river and canal that lead to Route 7, the main highway to the north through the center of southern Iraq. Route 1, a more westerly highway to Baghdad, passes within a few miles of An Nasiriyah but does not come within the city limits. Apart from the fact that if you approach from the desert, An Nasiriyah is like an oasis with its palm trees and other greenery, but the city has little to offer; pictures show an uninviting, Third World “sprawl of slums and industrial compounds,” with two to three-story concrete buildings set on a grid of bad roads and alleyways, many strewn with garbage and raw sewage.²¹⁸ The city was all the more rundown because its largely Shia population was known to have opposed Saddam’s rule, and he repaid the favor by neglecting even its most basic needs.

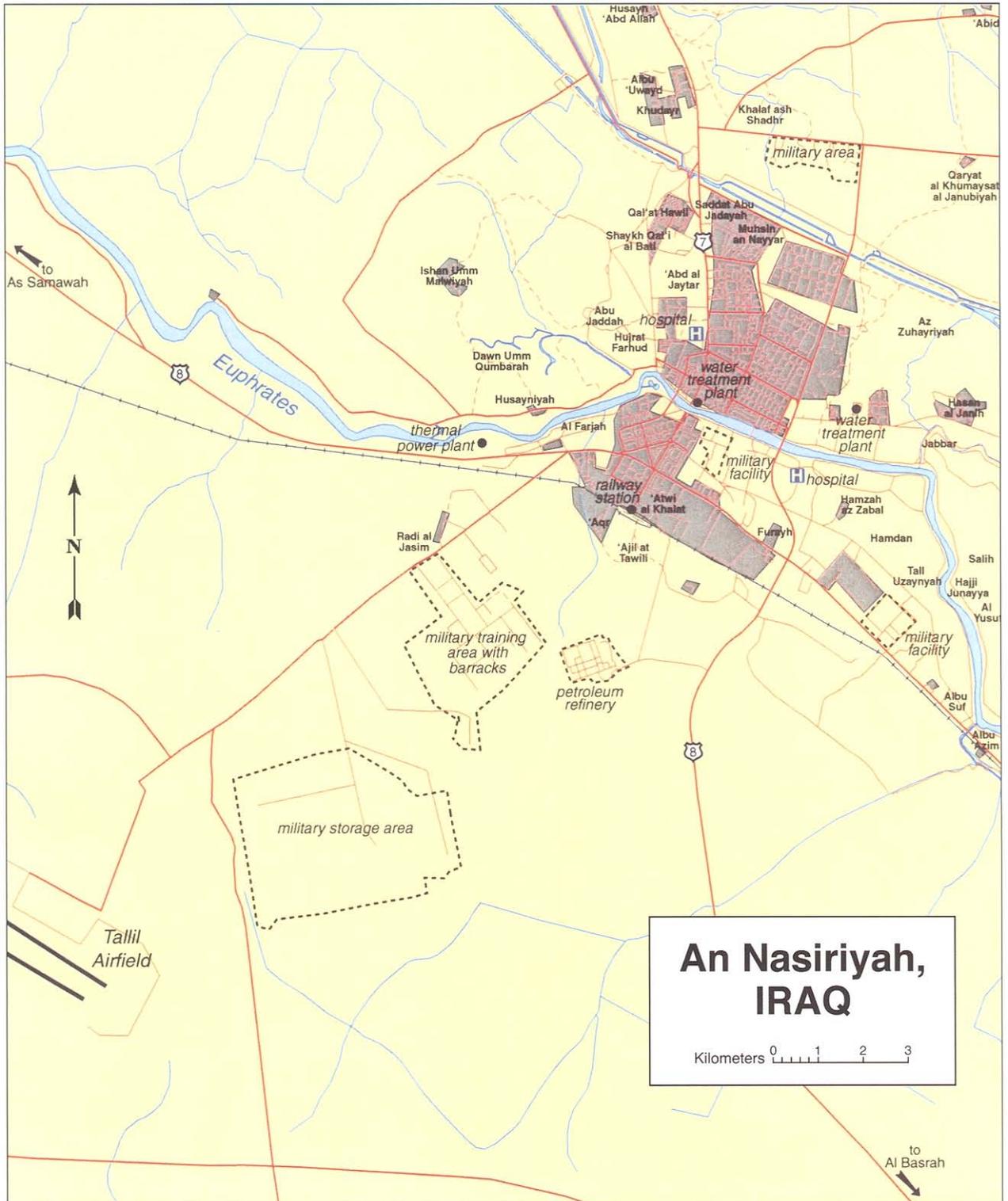
Task Force Tarawa’s mission was to be the first Marine unit at An Nasiriyah and to secure the bridge over the Euphrates on Route 1, which lay a few kilometers west of the city. It had the follow-on mission to “be prepared to” secure the bridges over the Euphrates and the Saddam Canal on the eastern edge of the city, which the Marine division, especially Regimental Combat Team 1 (RCT 1), would need to pass over on its way north on Route 7 toward Al Kut. The plan was for RCT 1 to more or less keep pace with RCTs 5 and 7 as they moved up Route 1. In a sense it was a straightforward mission, and it was one that had been assigned to Task Force Tarawa before it arrived in Kuwait. Task force officers, down to the company level, had performed map studies, war games, and rehearsals for An Nasiriyah.²¹⁹ That said there was a difference between the East and West Coast Marines, who had been visualizing the first days of the war since the summer of 2002. By contrast, most Task Force Tarawa Marines did not begin to focus in on the mission until December 2002, and while the operational picture had come into progressively sharper focus as Ground Day approached, there were still a lot of unknowns about An

Nasiriyah. One lingering question was just how “permissive” the city would be. The general assumption was that the Marines would receive a friendly welcome from the townspeople, and at worst some light resistance from Saddam loyalists. Certainly the U.S. Army, which would pass through part of the area before the Marines, would find out for sure.²²⁰

On 22 March I MEF announced that within the next 24 hours it wanted to secure the eastern crossing sites at An Nasiriyah and commence the forward passage of lines by 1st Marine Division through Task Force Tarawa.²²¹ On 23 March, I MEF reported that it had released its Fragmentary Order 017-03 that tasked Task Force Tarawa with conducting a relief in place with the 3d Infantry Division “at [the] Highway 1 Euphrates River crossing and attack to seize [the] bridges east of An Nasiriyah ... [in order to] facilitate the unimpeded continuation of the attack by 1st MarDiv to the north and northwest.”²²²

It was a mission fraught with potential complications. Task Force Tarawa’s western boundary was with the Army, and the task force’s first job was to relieve elements of the 3d Infantry Division that had passed through the area on their way to the western desert. Then, after seizing the bridges that passed through the city, the task force would have to coordinate the forward passage of lines with RCT 1. These missions are difficult enough in peacetime between units that have trained together, let alone units from two separate Services, Army and Marines, and two separate chains-of-command, task force and division, which literally had trouble getting on the same radio frequency. There was a final complication: Marines, many of them new to combat, not to mention the demands of combat in a city, were beginning to get very tired. The burst of adrenaline that had carried them across the border and into combat could not keep all of the Marines on their feet forever, especially when everyone, from the force commander to the private on the firing line, had to work and fight in the hot, bulky NBC protective gear, usually with a flak vest as the outer layer, in the desert heat. The Marines were approaching a culminating point of sorts, the end of the first phase of the battle for Iraq.²²³

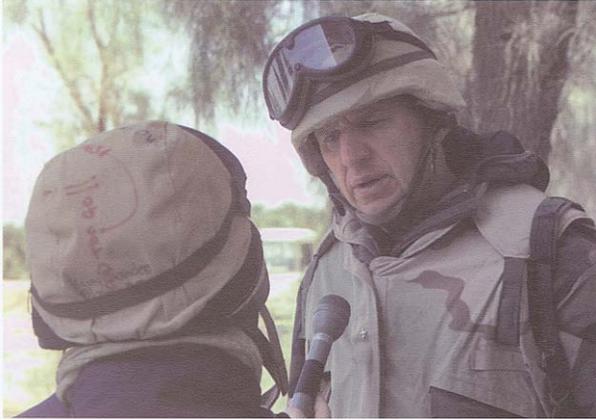
At An Nasiriyah, Task Force Tarawa was, briefly,



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the de facto main effort, and the burden of winning this particular fight fell on the shoulders of Brigadier General Richard F. Natonski. He has been described as a large man with a deliberate, confident bearing who was shaped by his experiences as an expedi-

tionary unit commander and as a senior staff officer in the current operations section at CentCom as well as in Plans, Policies, and Operations at Headquarters Marine Corps. Senior members of Natonski's staff liked working for him and even called him a "model



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BGen Richard F. Natonski, here speaking to a member of the media, urged the Marines of Task Force Tarawa to press on and quickly seize and hold the bridges in An Nasiriyah, to keep the enemy off balance.

commanding general.” An Nasiriyah was to be Task Force Tarawa’s first major challenge. Both Natonski and many of his Marines knew it might be their only time at center stage. He was determined to get it right, even if that meant demanding sacrifices from his line commanders.

When they met late on 22 March, General Natonski and the commander of RCT 2, Colonel Ronald L. Bailey, focused on the I MEF order. Following up on the I MEF fragmentary order, General Natonski tasked Colonel Bailey, who commanded most of the ground troops in the task force, with seizing both the Route 1 and the Route 7 crossings on 23 March. This was a departure from the original plan to begin by seizing the Route 1 bridge to the west of the city, and then move on the “eastern,” or “city” bridges “on order,” which meant there would be a delay between the two evolutions, a chance, however short, to fine-tune the planning for the next step. There was nothing new by way of intelligence about An Nasiriyah, but Colonel Bailey was warned to expect small arms fire. When he expressed some concerns, his troops needed rest and his mechanized assets were low on fuel, General Natonski told him it was important to press on, the Marines would have to run on adrenaline.²²⁴

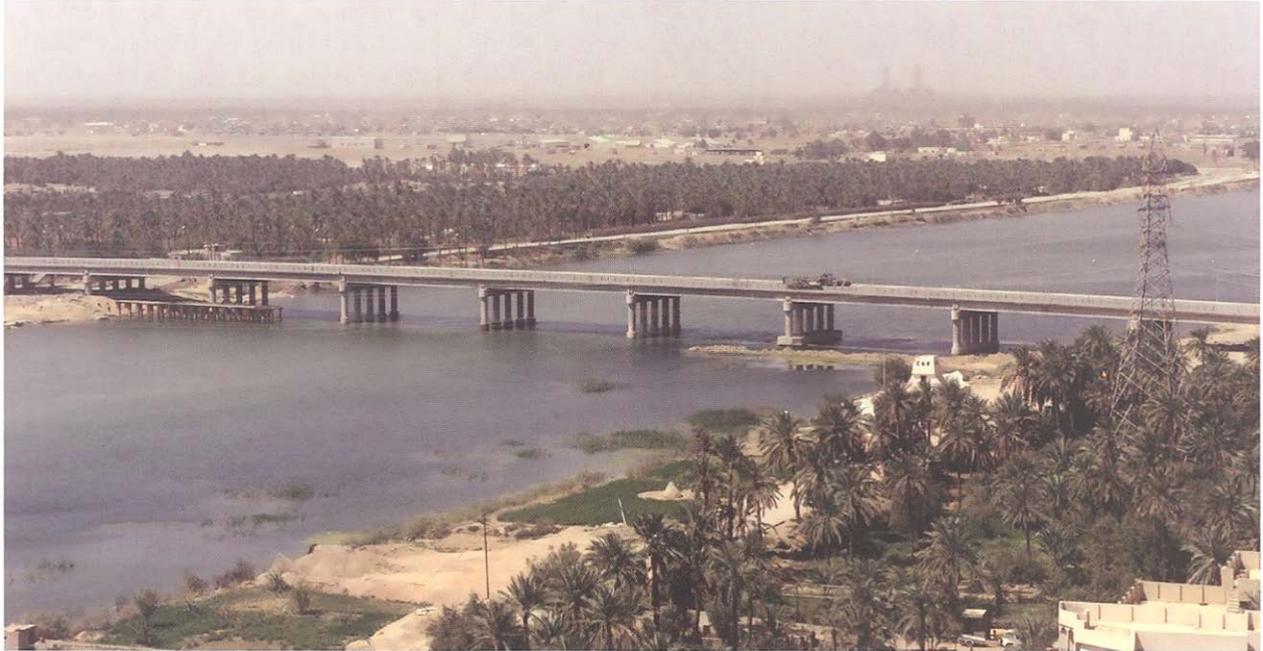
Marines throughout the theater felt that the next day, 23 March, started bad and never got any better. Around daybreak, the U.S. Army’s truck-borne 507th Maintenance Company lost its way and blundered into a bloody ambush in An Nasiriyah. One of the members of the 507th was Private First Class Jessica Lynch, who was wounded and captured by the Iraqis

and after being rescued went on to become a celebrity of sorts. This helped set the stage for the events that followed, as did the relief in place to the west of the city between Task Force Tarawa, in particular Company C, 2d Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, and the 3d Infantry Division. This was accompanied by a boundary shift that put virtually all of An Nasiriyah in Marine battle space. The relief in place and the boundary shift were otherwise unremarkable, despite occasional allegations to the contrary.^{225*}

A few miles away, during the advance toward An Nasiriyah from the southeast, at about the same time as the 507th was ambushed, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, with tanks and a combined antiarmor team in the lead, encountered small arms and mortar fire while still well outside the city, a portent of more to come. A short while later the Marines encountered a few survivors from the 507th, which fed the hope that there might be more survivors up ahead. This possibility put added pressure on Colonel Bailey.

Mid-morning on 23 March, General Natonski flew twice to the battlefield in his command Huey helicopter. When he looked down from the air, he did not see the regimental combat team’s troops where he wanted them to be. His impression was that the attack was not going quickly enough; what were they waiting for? He ordered the Huey to land at Colonel Bailey’s forward command post, which was near a railroad bridge outside the city limits, so that he could urge him to move faster. On the first visit, the general spoke both with Captain Troy K. King, USA, the commander of the 507th, who told him firsthand about the ambush, and with Lieutenant Colonel Ricky L. Grabowski, the commander of the lead battalion, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, in addition to Colonel Bailey himself.²²⁶ General Natonski told Colonel Bailey and Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski that he could see nothing in their way, no enemy tanks or other mechanized assets, and that the force was relying on Task Force Tarawa to seize the bridges and hold them open. General Natonski believed that by moving fast, the task force would keep the enemy off balance and, ultimately, limit the number of friendly casualties. After talking to Colonel Bailey, General Natonski

*Reacting to a question about boundaries, LtGen David D. McKiernan commented that the events in An Nasiriyah did “not equate to any seam or any joint problem. There were on-order boundaries that were placed in effect both south and north of An Nasiriyah, between V Corps and I MEF, which made sense [and] which were triggered at the right time . . . I don’t think the boundary shift could have gone much better.” (LtGen David D. McKiernan intvw, 30Jun03 [U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.]



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The bridge spanning the Euphrates River at An Nasiriyah needed to be secured intact as it was on the vital main supply route for Coalition forces moving north in Iraq.

ski flew to the I MEF command post at Jalibah, a few minutes' flying time from An Nasiriyah, and briefed General Conway on the situation. When he returned to Bailey's position an hour later, Natonski repeated his orders, which now contained the even more forceful pronouncement, seemingly from Conway's mouth, that Bailey was holding up the force.*

Colonel Bailey did as he was told and made the general's intent his own, despite personal reservations. This was, after all, a city that had not been thoroughly probed by reconnaissance in the recent past, perhaps because of the expectations that the Iraqis would be friendly.** Similarly, there appears to have been no plan to conduct preparatory artillery or air attacks before the Marines entered the city limits, even though air and artillery support were on call

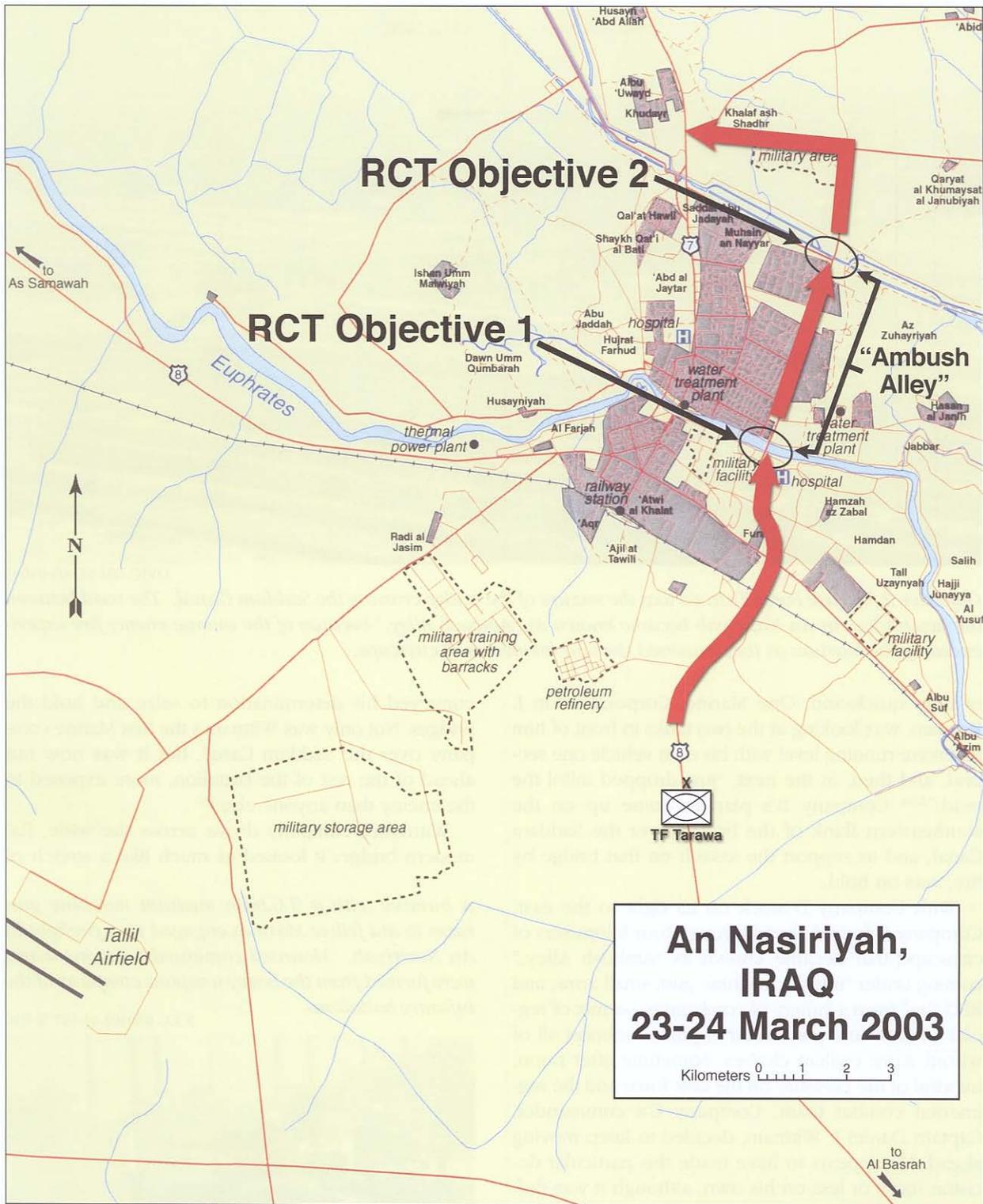
*An additional consideration BGen Richard Natonski mentioned in a postwar interview was that the cluster of American forces south of An Nasiriyah made an excellent target for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, a threat that was still very much on everyone's mind at the time. It is not clear whether he mentioned that point to Col Bailey on 23 March. (BGen Richard F. Natonski intvw, 26Mar04 [MCHC, Quantico, VA])

**To be sure, Marine reconnaissance elements close to the western bridge were working their way back toward Task Force Tarawa, and U.S. Army Special Forces were operating in the area on each side of the river, but this did not equate to a reconnaissance of the city itself. (Reynolds, Journal, entry for 1Jul04, recording a conversation with Task Force Tarawa's G-3; BGen Richard F. Natonski intvw, 26Mar04 [MCHC, Quantico, VA])

and became very active participants in the battle. Cobras flew above the advancing Marines, and the artillerymen of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, were following in trace of RCT 2's lead elements, ready to emplace and process fire missions in very short order. General Natonski later praised the battalion for providing "invaluable" counter-battery fire during the battle, in addition to responding for calls for fire from Marines under attack.²²⁷

After the first meeting ended and the three principals went their separate ways, Colonel Bailey had second thoughts and wanted to talk to Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski again. He wanted to be sure that Grabowski had not left with the wrong impression—Grabowski should proceed, but not at all costs. It was the kind of thought that passes through a commander's mind as he sends his troops off to battle, especially on the first day. Bailey was a conscientious officer with a reputation for taking care of his Marines. But Grabowski was already out of reach, moving into the attack, and it was too late to review the bidding.²²⁸

It was now sometime before noon; after the fight, Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski commented that it was difficult to remember exactly what happened when, given the intensity of the combat, which plays tricks on a person's sense of time. The sun was high, the day clear and hot. Two kilometers south of the Euphrates, the tanks detached to refuel, but the rest of



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Grabowski's battalion continued over the river and into the city. After the friendly tanks detached to refuel, Company B encountered enemy tanks, which were engaged and destroyed by antiarmor Marines, including a "Javelin" team. Company A secured the

far end of the eastern bridge over the Euphrates. Then Company B, with the battalion command group, crossed over the bridge and, looking for a route around downtown An Nasiriyah, drove onto apparently firm ground that turned out to be a kind



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Objective 2 for Task Force Tarawa was the seizure of the bridge crossing the Saddam Canal. The road between the two bridges in An Nasiriyah became known as “Ambush Alley,” because of the intense enemy fire experienced by the Marines as they traversed the four kilometers of cityscape.

of tarry quicksand. One Marine, Corporal Jason J. Polanco, was looking at the two tanks in front of him that were running level with his own vehicle one second, and then, in the next, “just dropped in[to] the mud.”^{229*} Company B’s plan to come up on the southeastern flank of the bridge over the Saddam Canal, and to support the assault on that bridge by fire, was on hold.

With Company B stuck on its right to the east, Company C forged ahead through four kilometers of cityscape that became known as “Ambush Alley,” coming under “intense machine gun, small arms, and RPG fire” from a variety of combatants—a mix of regular soldiers and paramilitary fighters—almost all of whom wore civilian clothes. Sometime after noon, mindful of the pressure on the task force and the regimental combat team, Company C’s commander, Captain Daniel J. Wittnam, decided to keep moving ahead. He appears to have made this particular decision more or less on his own, although it was definitely consistent with his battalion commander’s intent. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski had effectively

conveyed his determination to seize and hold the bridges. Not only was Wittnam’s the first Marine company over the Saddam Canal, but it was now out ahead of the rest of the battalion, more exposed to the enemy than anyone else.²³⁰

Wittnam’s company drove across the wide, flat modern bridge; it looked as much like a stretch of

A humvee with a 7.62mm medium machine gun races to aid fellow Marines engaged in a firefight in An Nasiriyah. Mounted combined weapons teams were formed from the heavy weapons company of the infantry battalions.

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*This may have been Sobka, a geological phenomenon peculiar to the Middle East, which was encountered elsewhere in Iraq and mired other Marine vehicles. It may also just have been sewage, with the top layer baked into a crust.

highway as a bridge, into what amounted to a kind of fire sack. The weapons platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Lonnie O. Parker, remembered the feeling: "We all came out of the door [of our amtrack], got . . . sit-

uational awareness of where we were, where the enemy was. They were located north of us, they were located to the west of us, they were located to the south of us, and they were located to the east of

The Other Ambush on 23 March

A few hours after Wittnam's Marines drove across the bridge over the canal into the enemy fire sack, another group of Marines had a similar experience in the desert north of the city. The story begins late on the afternoon of 23 March. One of division's Lockheed P-3 Orions, borrowed from the U.S. Navy, was flying high and slow above the battlefield to scout the route up Highway 1, while light armored reconnaissance Marines did the same on the ground. Although one of the accompanying Cobra pilots who had been conducting low-level scouting for the armored reconnaissance Marines thought he had seen some signs of enemy activity, the route seemed clear to division. General Mattis decided he wanted the Marines to move even faster, and personally called one of his armored reconnaissance commanders, Lieutenant Colonel Herman S. Clardy III, of 3d Battalion, codename "Wolfpack," to tell him to proceed up to the town of Hantush some distance up the road. Clardy told his commanders to pull off the road and gather around him for a five-minute briefing and an order. Minutes later, the battalion went "screaming north" into the gathering dusk, well out ahead of any friendly formations and outsize the artillery fan.

Captain Charles J. Blume, Clardy's fire support coordinator, remembered in vivid terms what happened next:

We definitely could feel [that] we were getting well out in front of the division. We lost communications with the DASC-A [the airborne direct air support coordinator] and it was starting to get dark. . . . We began to see abandoned weapons and equipment strewn along the highway. [We saw a] suspicious vehicle . . . to our front that [looked at] . . . us and sped away. . . . We could all feel the hair standing up on the backs of our necks. You could tell something was about to happen.

What did happen next, at 1607Z, was burned into the memory of one of the company com-

manders, Major Bruce Bell:

The Fedayeen had actually laid out a decent "U"-shaped ambush spread over . . . 500 meters on both sides of the road. . . . They picked a tactically sound, defensively oriented bend in the highway . . . to exploit massed surprise . . . fires on the lead units of whoever fell into the trap. They also had assembled a column of approximately 10 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and other various "technical" . . . vehicles [mostly pickup trucks with machine gun mounts] which they positioned on the eastern flank of the ambush position, hoping to use a north-south jeep trail . . . to move down and flank units caught in the kill zone on the highway.

When the enemy opened fire, at first it was only scattered tracers flying across the road, and then there was a torrent of fire all up and down the route of march. Some of the enemy appeared to be massing for an attack. The Marines fired back, but the enemy fire kept coming. The air officer tried to reach Clardy over the radio, but could not. Someone, either the air officer or the communications officer, called "Slingshot," the heart-stopping code word in this war for "I am being overrun." The division later reported that the call came over the Iridium cell phone, the official/unofficial alternate communications system in this war, and that "3d MAW immediately responded with 6 Harriers and 4 Cobras, followed shortly thereafter by a host of additional air assets." It was all over by 1741Z, the remnants of a battalion-sized Iraqi unit left smoking on the battlefield. The Marines, miraculously, emerged from the fight with one wounded in action and some battle scars on their vehicles, but were still able to continue moving up the road.*

*IMEF sitrep 221800ZMar03 to 231759ZMar03 (Copy in Reynolds Working Papers, MCHC, Quantico, VA); 1stMarDiv ComdC, Jan-Jun03 (GRC, Quantico, VA), sec 2, chap 5, pp. 5-8; Maj Bruce Bell, e-mails to author, 11-12Jul03 (Copies among Reynolds Working Papers, MCHC, Quantico, VA)



DVIC DM-SD-05-04642

A Marine surveys some of the damage done to the city of An Nasiriyah after more than eight days of fighting. The heavy cost of the fighting impacted the lives of both the populace and combatants for some time to come.

us.”¹⁶ The Marines found themselves on a roadway on the far side of the canal, surrounded by fields that were lower than the roadway, which made them good targets for the waiting Iraqi soldiers. They could see the enemy scurrying in and around their fighting positions and the plain concrete buildings that were all some distance away on the other side of the fields and the berms that helped to define the fields. Apparently emboldened by their success against the 507th, and now ready to fight the next wave of Americans, the Iraqis fired infantry weapons and, especially, mortars up to 120mm in caliber. Marines later learned that the enemy’s positions were primarily oriented to the north, in order to defend against an airborne attack that was never planned, let alone executed. The enemy infantry showed no interest in closing with the Marines and getting within easy range of their small arms; they chose either to fire from their foxholes or to dart out from a courtyard or alleyway to fire off a few rounds. At least one Marine small unit leader had to keep his hard-chargers from rushing across the open fields at the enemy.^{232*} In-

*SSgt Lonnie O. Parker remembered that the rocket propelled grenade and small arms fire soon tapered off. (SSgt Lonnie O. Parker intvw, 23Mar03 [MCHC, Quantico, VA])

stead, the Marines used their own weapons against the enemy and called in artillery; 1st Battalion, 10th Marines’ guns soon fired to good effect. Sadly, the company’s forward observer, First Lieutenant Frederick E. Pokorney, Jr., was killed while calling for fire. But thanks in part to the enemy’s poor marksmanship, and thanks in part to the Marines’ good work, the company was soon making some headway against the enemy and consolidating its own position.

Captain Wittnam had seized an important objective, and he wanted to hold it until reinforced or relieved. Then, a U.S. Air Force Fairchild-Republic A-10 Warthog swooped by, circled, and lined up for a strafing run on the Marines as they watched in horror. Although a jet, the Warthog is designed to fly low for close air support missions and, with its depleted uranium rounds, was known as a good tank buster. It is usually a welcome sight on the battlefield and had already done good work on 23 March against other targets. But now it was bearing down on friendlies.

One Company C Marine on the bridge, First Lieutenant Michael S. Seely, had been strafed by an A-10 before, in 1991, and he knew instantly what was happening:

I did not even have to look up, because I knew exactly what that sound was. . . . I ran up and found 2d Platoon scattered all around the area there, but I grabbed their [radioman and] said, “Put that damn thing on battalion Tac now!” I got on battalion Tac immediately and started calling, “Cease fire! Cease fire!” Timberwolf 6 [the battalion commander] came up, perfect[ly] calm, and I started talking to him. He said, “What do you got?” I said, “We [are] having friendly air, [an] A-10 strafing our pos.” I do not know the time that it took, but it was probably a couple minutes later . . . I do not know, 10, 15, whatever—the A-10 was still circling overhead.²³³

To make matters worse, the A-10, apparently along with his wingman as the A-10 was flying in a two-plane section, made numerous deadly passes, while the Marines on the ground tried every way possible to end what arguably became the most notorious friendly fire incident of the war. By mid-afternoon each of the battalion’s rifle companies was, in the understated words of the *Marine Corps Gazette* article about the fight, “decisively engaged in non-mutually supporting positions” throughout the



JCCC 030411-M-6910K-110

Marines assigned to Combat Service Support Battalion 18 work to retrieve a destroyed P7 amphibious assault vehicle following the fighting in An Nasiriyah.

city and only in sporadic touch with their battalion commander, whose tactical radio nets have been described as “clogged.”²³⁴ It was only later in the afternoon that the companies were able to support each other, which is what Wittnam had been waiting for, given his intent to hold the position until reinforcements could get to him. He estimated later that the wait was between two and a half and three hours.²³⁵ He and his men had breathed an enormous collective sigh of relief when a pair of Marine tanks rumbled into their lines and suppressed the remaining Iraqi opposition once and for all. There had been a couple of anxious moments when the Company C Marines first heard tanks coming their way, and before they identified them as the friendly reinforcements they were hoping and waiting for.²³⁶ Exhausted, dirty, and bloody, they began to recover from the first day of heavy fighting for I MEF in Iraq, which cost the lives of 18 Marines. With some pride and some sadness, Staff Sergeant Parker summed it all up when he said it “was not supposed to be no really big conflict that day,” but “we put up one hellacious of a fight. . . . [I]t is really sad when it ends and you lose the majority of your people not from enemy fire but from friendly fire.”²³⁷

Task Force Tarawa remained heavily engaged in An Nasiriyah for eight more days, working to clear the enemy from the route through the city. This included some bitter house-to-house fighting, defeating some one thousand enemy fighters massing for a counterattack and, on 1 April, support for the mission to rescue that most famous of survivors of the ambush of the 507th, Private First Class Lynch. The field historian attached to Task Force Tarawa commented that 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, became “adept

at collecting front-line intelligence and following up with what were termed ‘House Calls’ on the homes of officials of the regime,” which, in turn, led to further contacts and a growing hold on An Nasiriyah.²³⁸ Throughout this period there was good cooperation with U.S. Army Special Forces, whose detachments continued to operate alongside the task force and produced actionable intelligence, which often led to fire missions, air strikes, or raids like the Lynch rescue.^{239*} It is worth noting one such attack, early on, when Task Force Tarawa drove a band of *Fedayeen* from a hospital that turned out to have a stockpile of “200 AK-47 . . . [rifles], 20,000 rounds of ammunition, 3,000 chemsuits and masks, a tank [!]. . . , 400 Iraqi uniforms, and four U.S. Army uniforms.”²⁴⁰ This was one of the first concrete indications to the Coalition that Iraq was one vast ammunition dump-cum-armory, which would pose a disposal problem on an unimagined scale. Nevertheless, by early April, Nasiriyah was taking its first tentative steps, under Task Force Tarawa, toward post combat reconstruction, a few days ahead of the rest of Iraq.

Various controversies about 23 March were to continue for some time. There were questions, some of which made more sense than others, about such things as why the Marines did not bypass An Nasiriyah or in general do a better job of fighting in cities.²⁴¹ There were other questions about whether it was right for Task Force Tarawa to push into An Nasiriyah the way it did. Would it have made sense to wait for the tanks moving with 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, to refuel before advancing into the city? Or to wait until the battlefield had been “shaped,” that is, why had not there been a more thorough reconnaissance before the Marines entered the city, or why had not artillery and air struck Iraqi positions before the Marines reached them? Did Captain Wittnam’s decision to advance Company C by itself make sense? There are answers, some more compelling than others, to all of the questions about 23 March. General Natonski’s pressure on RCT 2, and Captain Wittnam’s decision to push on and then hold on, may have saved the day. One of the Iraqi commanders captured at An Nasiriyah commented that the fast tempo of the American advance had made it impossible for him to respond in time and that he had been “shocked” at the aggressiveness of Marine small unit

*This was representative of cooperation with various Special Forces in the entire Marine area of operations, although Gen Mattis and Gen Conway eventually came to the conclusion that these operators were better at some tasks than others. In particular, they complained it could take them too long to plan a mission to take advantage of a rapidly breaking situation.



DVIC DM-SD-04-01582

A Marine comes to the aid of injured and displaced Iraqi civilians caught in a firefight north of An Nasiriyah. The civilians were later evacuated to the triage area of Regimental Combat Team 1 to receive medical treatment.

leaders. "He said that his fighters were very confident initially . . . but became dispirited when the Marines kept coming at them."^{242*}

From the CFLCC and I MEF point of view, it would not have made sense to bypass An Nasiriyah. The layout of the roads and bridges around the city made it difficult to bypass. Not even assault bridging would have helped. When RCT 1's Colonel Joseph D. Dowdy considered that option, he concluded it would add days to the journey north. Even if the bypass option had made sense, the Marines would still have had to find a way to deal with potential enemy

threats to their lines of communication from within the city. Simply put, CFLCC forces needed to control all of the routes in and around An Nasiriyah and had had little choice but to go through the city. As General McKiernan put it: "Everybody had to go by An Nasiriyah, in either corps' sector, because that was the only place to cross the Euphrates. . . . It was just the [nature of] the whole fight in the south. Our enemy concentrated out of urban areas."²⁴³

Perhaps the most bitter controversy about An Nasiriyah was in a class by itself, the controversy over the "friendly fire" by the A-10s, which led to a lengthy investigation and, in April 2004, to the release by Central Command of a 900-page report that concluded it was a Marine air officer who had cleared the A-10s to fire on any vehicles on the far side of the

^{242*}There was supporting air on station and artillery on call throughout the period; the issue is whether there was an adequate amount of preparatory fire.



DVIC DM-SD-04-01589

A convoy of humvees from Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, with tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missile launchers, makes its way north through the “mother of all sandstorms.”

bridge over the canal. Located a few hundred yards away with Company B, the officer apparently believed he was with the lead element of the battalion and therefore no Marines were in front of him and Company C did not have its own forward air controller. The report essentially invited the Marine Corps to continue the investigation to determine whether any disciplinary action should be taken against that officer, which would perhaps prolong the controversy. One observer has argued that it is unfair to single out the air controller, since his actions followed, at least in part, from the actions of others in his chain-of-command, and since it appears that some of the battalion’s communications nets failed at crucial points.²⁴⁴ Many Marines found that line-of-sight communications inside the city limits was terrible.

The end result of the general confusion on 23

March and the attack by the A-10 was not only the painful casualty count but also a monumental traffic jam that lasted through 24 March and into 25 March.²⁴⁵ The CentCom report stated that “eight of the deaths were verified as the result of enemy fire; of the remaining 10 Marines killed, investigators were unable to determine the cause of death as the Marines were also engaged in heavy fighting with the enemy at the time of the incident. Of the 17 wounded, only one was conclusively . . . hit by friendly fire.”²⁴⁶ Behind the Marines in the fight at the bridge and along “Ambush Alley” 30 kilometers of vehicles waited. In addition to Task Force Tarawa’s vehicles, there were literally hundreds of vehicles belonging to RCT 1. It was still a particularly lucrative target for the Iraqis. But not unlike his counterpart in RCT 2, the commander of RCT 1, Colonel Dowdy, was reluctant to try to squeeze his regiment through

Ambush Alley. And behind Colonel Dowdy a seemingly endless convoy of supply trucks was waiting to move north.^{247*}

This was the kind of evolution that attracted more attention than most subordinate commanders want. On 24 March there were a number of generals on site: Task Force Tarawa's General Natonski; the assistant 1st Marine Division commander, Brigadier General John F. Kelly, whom General Mattis tasked with roaming the battlefield to help him maintain situational awareness; and General Conway, the I MEF commander. Even a retired general was nearby, Major General Ray L. Smith, traveling with the division to gather material for a book, *The March Up*.^{**}

The kind of general who made it a point to see for himself how the fight was going, Conway traveled by helicopter from Jalibah, where I MEF Main was by now well established, to An Nasiriyah. On the way, he flew over what looked to him like a great deal of Marine combat power stretched out on the road, and he remembered thinking, with growing frustration, there should be no holding all of that power back. This made him all the more determined to deliver his message in no uncertain terms. After landing, Conway spent more than an hour at Task Force Tarawa's command post. Then he and General Natonski drove forward in a "soft-skinned" humvee, the vehicle that had replaced the jeep, through fires so intense that three Marines around them were injured. According to one account, the two generals talked matters over with Brigadier General Kelly and Colonel Dowdy while AK-47 rounds snapped overhead. General Natonski remembered later the topics discussed were whether the Marines could hold the bridges and whether 1st Marines could pass through Task Force Tarawa and over the bridges without delay. Throughout, Conway's basic message was simple, find a way to get things moving again.²⁴⁸

Word spread wide about the fighting in An Nasiriyah, along with reports and rumors of heavy American casualties. Recordings of a disturbing Iraqi

television broadcast showing the killed and captured soldiers made the rounds while corpsmen and doctors waited for the Marine wounded. There was a perception that U.S. forces had suffered a setback and that the war was not going according to plan, especially among the "experts" on television with their nonstop stream of commentary and free advice, usually from thousands of miles away. They were not, almost needless to say, making themselves popular with commanders in Iraq and Kuwait. Reflecting the views of many, the field historian with Task Force Tarawa wrote on 23 March that "[a]ny hopes we may have had for an easy entry into An Nasiriyah, and any larger hopes for a campaign as a series of capitulations, have ended today." The war could be longer and harder than anyone had expected or hoped.²⁴⁹

Underlying this new perception was the nature of the fight at An Nasiriyah, which General McKiernan characterized simply as "a damned tough urban fight."²⁵⁰ It was that, and more. The general expectation had been that the Iraqi soldiers in the regular army divisions stationed in the south of the country would surrender in droves once the Coalition crossed into Iraq, and that the population, at least in the south, where there was a Shia majority hostile to Saddam Hussein's Sunni ruling class, would welcome the Coalition as liberators. But the number of prisoners had been measured in the hundreds, not the expected thousands. This did not mean that the Iraqi Army was fighting hard. On the contrary, it seemed to be simply melting away. What was more surprising was that the irregular forces, especially the loosely organized *Saddam Fedayeen*, literally the "men of sacrifice," soon to be renamed "regime death squads" by Pentagon edict, were willing to stand and fight. Typically in civilian clothes, they were hard to pick out from innocent civilians, whom they were often more than willing to use as human shields or to sacrifice in other ways. There were also numerous reports that they were willing to feign surrender and then open fire on anyone who advanced to take them prisoner.

Speaking about An Nasiriyah, General Conway said that I MEF was facing "hard little knots of Fedayeen."²⁵¹ General McKiernan characterized the enemy as "a combination of several different sources, Fedayeen, Special RG, some military, regular army that . . . took off their uniforms . . . but it was a pretty determined enemy."²⁵² General Mattis spoke for many when he declared that the *Fedayeen* "lack any kind of courage. They literally hide behind women and children, holding them in their houses as they

*The field historian on site noted "the traffic was really snarled around an intersection of 2 major roads" to the south of An Nasiriyah. This was almost certainly a reference to the point where the road from the south branched, with one branch leading to An Nasiriyah and the other to the western bridge, which meant the traffic jam was miles long. (Col Reed R. Bonadonna, "Field History Journal," entry for 23Mar03)

**Gen Ray Smith and his coauthor, Bing West, recorded many interesting vignettes for posterity, including the mood of a young infantryman on the line at An Nasiriyah who seemed to think that events had slowed because of the number of generals there. It is not clear whether the Marine knew that he was talking to a general.

fire . . . They really lack manhood. They are violating every sense of decency. They are as worthless an example of men as we have ever fought.”²⁵³ General Amos was equally outraged, commenting later that An Nasiriyah was a turning point for him: “When the Saddam Fedayeen came down and . . . were picking off our Marines, they became, in my mind, cannibals. And my whole perspective on how we were going to fight this war changed.”²⁵⁴

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that An Nasiriyah was a turning point for many, if not most, Marines. Not only was it the first heavy dose of combat for the Marines, but many things did not go as planned or hoped. The enemy was different than expected, more tenacious and committed, and he was having a certain degree of success. For him An Nasiriyah was a target-rich environment and a large number of Marines needed to pass through a relatively small area. For the Marines it came at a time when many were close to exhaustion, and the battle saw its share of misjudgments, mistakes, and bad luck. All things considered, it is not surprising that there was congestion and confusion, and that the pace slowed.

What is just as obvious is that no one in I MEF gave way under the pressure and that the Marines quickly recovered from the first day of battle in An Nasiriyah. It did not change the force’s focus or slow operations for more than a day. On the contrary, there was a hardening of resolve among many Marines. For his part, General Conway did not lose his focus. He consistently pushed division and wing to move north in order to defeat the *Republican Guard’s Baghdad* and *Al Nida Divisions*, which lay on I MEF’s route to Baghdad, while General Natonski and Tarawa dealt with the *Fedayeen* and other threats in the south.

Even though the firefights, sometimes heavy, continued in An Nasiriyah for a few days, RCT 1 had pushed through the eastern part of the city and started up Route 7 by the afternoon of 25 March. General Mattis’ intent was for RCT 1 to move quickly to the north, in the direction of Al Kut, in order to fix the *Baghdad Division* in place in the center of the country long enough for him to get the rest of the 1st Marine Division behind the enemy division, while blocking any Iraqi forces that might attack the Marines from the east. He did not want the Iraqi infantry to be able to fall back into Baghdad.²⁵⁵

Although the fighting in An Nasiriyah did not slow the division by much more than 12 hours, the weather did succeed where the enemy had failed. On the night of 24-25 March, the “mother of all sand-

storms” moved into the theater, with high winds stirring up massive clouds of sand and slowing operations to a crawl. General Usher, the 1st Force Service Support Group commander, called it the worst sandstorm in 20 years.²⁵⁶ In the words of the division’s command chronology, “Marines choked on the dust and visibility was reduced to almost nothing. Soon, it was blowing so hard that it was difficult to breathe outside.”²⁵⁷ Most air was grounded, leaving fire support to artillery and mortars. But some pilots braved the weather anyway. On 25 March, a field historian watched “a breathtaking performance by two Hueys . . . trying to deliver ammo. They flew straight up the road at about the level of the telephone lines. Between the wind and the prop wash, visibility must have been less than zero. . . . [T]he last I saw of them, they were flying [away] into the dust clouds.”²⁵⁸ Like the Huey pilots, Colonel Steven Hummer of the 7th Marines was not ready to let the weather stop him or his regiment. He himself became a ground guide, personally leading his Marines north in the storm, with “connecting files” behind him, Marines walking between vehicles, literally holding on to the one in front and the one in back, guiding them slowly forward. But finally it was too much even for Colonel Hummer, and he stopped his Marines for the night, putting them in a defensive posture.²⁵⁹ Hunkering down for the night did not necessarily mean the Marines were safe. In one of the tragic, incomprehensible accidents that occur during wartime, the executive officer of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, Major Kevin G. Nave, was killed by an earthmover while he was sleeping during the dust storm. A few miles to the southeast at Jalibah, the force was trying to operate out of the “Bug,” its expensive custom-made air-conditioned canvas command post. But on the 25th, the lights were flickering on and off and the canvas was flapping vigorously. Marine expeditionary force officers were worried that the Bug would literally blow away, and they took the precaution of passing control back to the rear at Camp Commando for a day.²⁶⁰

The sandstorm was followed by thunderstorms, which cleared the air somewhat but created mud, both on the ground and in the air. More than one Marine commented that when the thunderstorm hit, it seemed like it was raining mud; the rain hit the dust suspended in the air and drove it to the ground in wet, heavy drops. Many division Marines went to sleep in sand and woke up in mud on 26 March. For at least a day after the storm, there was a massive cloud of sand over Kuwait, which limited visibility, continued to keep many aircraft on the ground, and

made it seem that the sun was shining through a dense, bright yellow filter.²⁶¹

The Washington Post reported that now, in the wake of An Nasiriyah and the sandstorm, “some senior U.S. military officers” were convinced that the war would last for months and would require “considerably more combat power.” The United States had kicked in the door, and the house had not collapsed; on the contrary, it seemed to be holding up fairly well in some ways.²⁶² General McKiernan was con-

cerned not so much about the situation as about what his commanders might be thinking: “The going was a little tough. The Fedayeen . . . and the urban defenses were something we were going to have to deal with. The weather was bad, and we had extended our supply lines.” As a result, he felt the need to fly up to see the V Corps commander, Lieutenant General William S. Wallace, to look him in the eye and to “know that we both saw the way ahead,” which was Baghdad.²⁶³

Chapter 6

Toward the Enemy Center of Gravity: Ad Diwaniyah, Al Kut, and the Pause

Even before the storm had completely passed, Regimental Combat Teams 5 and 7 resumed their progress up Route 1, the northwest-southeast axis running to Baghdad, which was by turns a new four-lane highway and a roadbed under construction. On the way, they faced roadside ambushes by a variety of enemy formations that had prepared positions alongside the highway. An incident on 25 March that would ultimately mean a Navy Cross Medal for First Lieutenant Brian R. Chontosh conveys a clear sense of the nature of the fighting. In the early morning hours of the day, Lieutenant Chontosh, an energetic, down-to-earth bodybuilder, who started his career in the Marine Corps on the enlisted side of the house and still shaved his head, was in the lead vehicle of his combined antiarmor platoon, behind four M1A1 Abrams tanks as 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, pushed north toward Ad Diwaniyah, a city some 100 miles

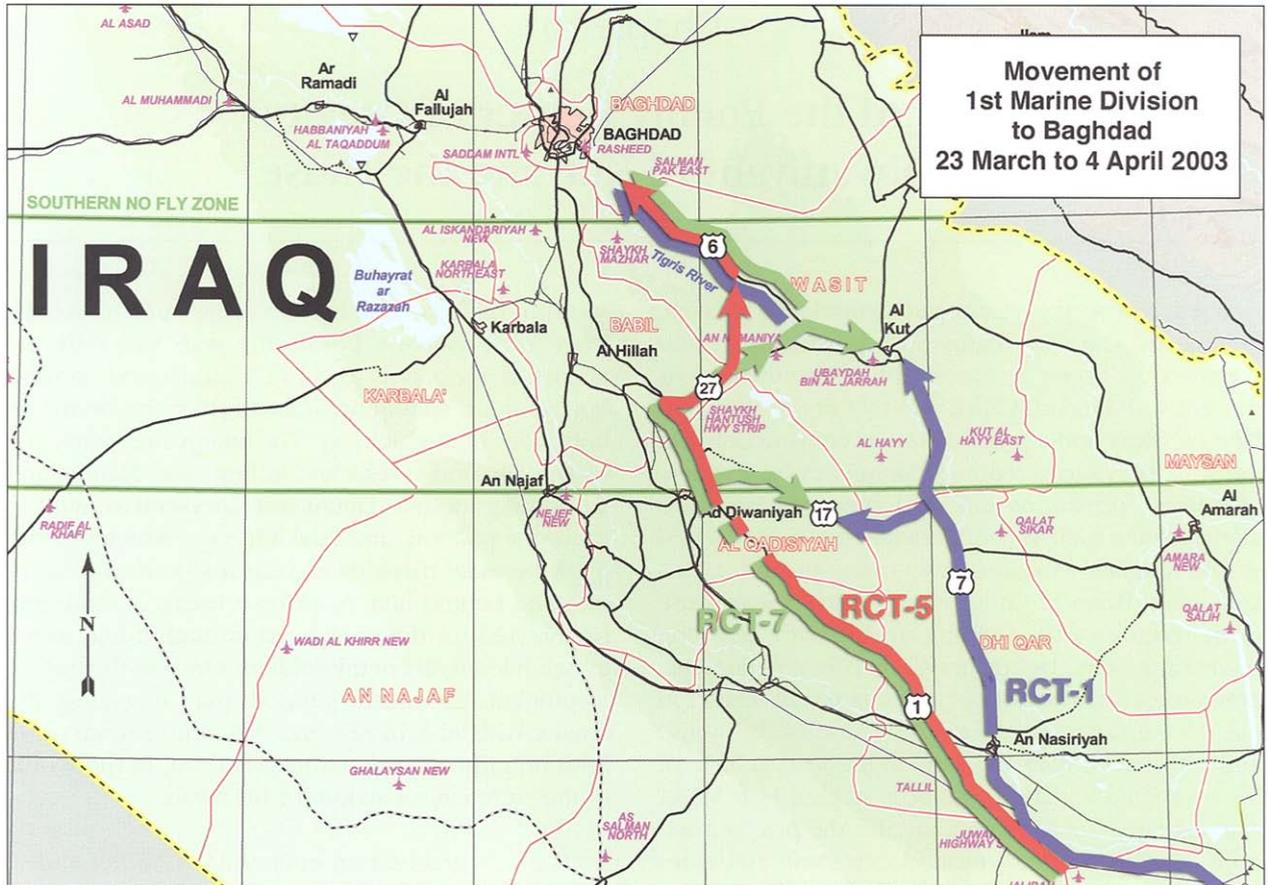
south of Baghdad that had been the home of a large Iraqi Army garrison before the war. Suddenly the enemy, described as a mix of irregular and conventional forces, sprang an ambush from the berms on both sides of the highway. The enemy fire struck one of the platoon's vehicles, killing one Marine and wounding another. Lieutenant Chontosh wanted to move the platoon out of the kill zone, which was difficult because there were vehicles both in front of him and behind him. Noticing a break in the berm, he directed his driver to head through it and into a trench filled with enemy soldiers. Once in the trench, Lieutenant Chontosh jumped out, engaging the enemy with an M16 rifle and then with a 9mm pistol until he ran out of ammunition. Then, in the words of the summary of action for his award:

[H]e . . . grabbed an enemy AK-47 [rifle] and

A convoy of Marines with Regimental Combat Team 5, watched over by scout helicopters, traverses the desert of central Iraq. The combat team had moved hundreds of miles and confronted countless ambushes in the first two weeks of operations in Iraq.

Photo courtesy of Defend America





continued to engage enemy soldiers as he continued the attack to clear the trench. . . . When the AK-47 was out of ammo he grabbed another and continued to engage [the] enemy both in and out of the trench under heavy enemy fire. A Marine following him found an enemy RPG [rocket propelled grenade] and gave it to Lieutenant Chontosh who . . . used it to engage a group of enemy soldiers, eliminating the . . . threat . . . His aggressive, violent action . . . undoubtedly saved the lives of many Marines along Highway 1 that day.²⁶⁴

Between 26 and 28 March, RCT 5 proceeded to crush *Fedayeen* opposition in and around Ad Diwaniyah. Even before the fighting had ended in Ad Diwaniyah, one of RCT 5's battalions seized the airfield at Hantush after what has been described as "a fierce firefight." Hantush was some 15 miles to the north of Ad Diwaniyah, located on Highway 27, an east-west axis that General Mattis intended to use in the coming days to approach Baghdad from the east. In the meantime, RCT 1 was fighting its way up Route 7 through towns and villages to the junction with Route 17, which was at roughly the same lati-

tude as the city of Al Amarah, not far from the border with Iran, the home of the Iraqi *10th Armored Division*, which was another potential threat, from the southeast, to Marines advancing on Baghdad.

The 1st Marine Division was moving ahead despite the increasing distance from its base in Kuwait. General Mattis had been prepared to rely on organic supplies for a few days; he later said that the 1st Marines, when they crossed the river at An Nasiriyah, fully expected to cut their supply lines "and just break loose and head north," relying on emergency resupply by air when necessary, hence the interest in Hantush airfield, and not having to worry about protecting their supply lines back to the rear.²⁶⁵ This was a reflection of General Mattis' "logistics lite" philosophy he had been inculcating in all of his troops for months, and of the benefits of General Usher's reorganization, the 1st Force Service Support Group having created a direct support structure for the division, especially the combat service support companies designed to move with the regiments. As stated in the division's command chronology, the reorganization "provided [for a] . . . shared situation awareness . . . [which enabled FSSG to] proactively calculate logistical needs and have them out the door

before the customer even registered a request.”²⁶⁶ Although statistics are lacking, this approach most likely helped to reduce the demand for consumables and, perhaps as important, contributed to an expeditionary mentality that made his Marines believe they could go the extra mile without extra supplies.

On a larger scale, the Marine Corps supply system had generally kept up, even though it was stretched. As the deputy Force Service Support Group commander, Colonel John L. Sweeney, commented on 24 March, “the plan is evolving” successfully; there had been “no operational pause due to logistics” because of “what those lance corporals are doing out there.”²⁶⁷ In the daily I MEF situation report for the next day, General Conway reflected satisfaction with the group’s efforts to date, especially the hose reel system it had laid from Kuwait to Jalibah, a distance of some 70 miles, in order to deliver fuel. The Force Service Support Group Marines had accomplished this feat in less than half the projected time.²⁶⁸

There can be little doubt that it had been a challenge to get supplies from the beach to the forward

Transportation Support Group vehicles loaded with ammunition, meals ready to eat, fuel, and water are staged for a convoy north. The 1st Force Service Support Group supported all logistics for the Marine expeditionary force in Iraq.

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bases of the Force Service Support Group, which quickly sprang up in Iraq behind the advancing Marines at places like Jalibah and Ad Diwaniyah. It turned out that the Army’s 377th Theater Support Command had not been able to meet all the needs of both I MEF and V Corps as originally hoped; the 377th was a relatively late arrival in theater, its headquarters not “closing” until March 2003. Partly because of this and partly because of the challenges the campaign would pose for any command planning to move men and equipment over such a long distance, logistics remained a concern for General McKiernan throughout the campaign, and there were some trade-offs. The main effort, V Corps, was typically supplied first, and the Marines were sometimes left to their own devices. Under Brigadier General Lehnert, the “wholesale” Marine Logistics Command had done what it could to bridge the gap between the 377th and the “retail” service support group and, in general, to meet I MEF’s needs. After its arrival in country in December 2002, it had worked wonders in its nearly featureless stretch of Kuwaiti desert now known as Tactical Assembly Area Fox, turning it into a vast logistics base. The general and his Marines often had to improvise, which they learned to do well. For example, the logistics command had to contract for 300-tractor-trailers driven by third-country nationals, many of whom were to drive hundreds of miles into Iraq under dangerous conditions, and then find ways to motivate them to continue working under near-combat conditions. One solution was to award “eagle, globe, and anchor” emblems to the more intrepid drivers. As the Marines moved north, I MEF kept asking the logistics command to keep pace, which it did by, in General Lehnert’s words: “using every transportations means available including Marine Corps tactical trucks, Army line haul, contracted third country national . . . vehicles, C-130 . . . air delivery, and rotary-wing aircraft.”²⁶⁹ After the war, General Lehnert concluded that he did not “know how much further we could have gone as the culminating point kept moving north. . . . We had every truck and every driver on the road to the limit of their ability. . . . We were always in a surge mode.” There were some notable shortages, especially of spare parts, and there was no reserve.²⁷⁰

What the Marine Logistics Command delivered to the 1st Force Service Support Group, the group pushed forward to its frontline customers. General Usher said it was sometimes a matter of “brute force logistics.” Despite all the group’s careful preparations, sometimes it came down to Marines muscling their way through a problem. When the system was

stressed, the general added, “[I]t was not pretty. It was not elegant. It was just sheer adrenaline.”²⁷¹ This was especially true as the Marine division sprinted toward Baghdad:

[Resupply] was accomplished by the integrated, rapid distribution of fuel, water, rations, and ammunition to the nearest SA [support area] or RRP [repair replenishment point] to the fight,

moved by [FSSG] assets . . . and in some cases [by] the MLC, at distances farther than anyone had imagined prior to the beginning of the war. At the height of the action, more than 250,000 gallons of fuel were moved on a daily basis from as far south as SA Coyote [in Kuwait] to as far north as SA Chesty at the An Numaniyah Airfield, stretching more than 300 miles over improved and unimproved highways [in the

The Missile Attack on CFLCC

Marines and soldiers were increasingly becoming aware of the fact that this was a war without defined front lines and rear areas. Threats could come from any quarter, when least expected. But one week into the war, the rear areas, especially in Kuwait, seemed fairly safe, and the mood at Camp Doha was, if not exactly relaxed, at least moving into a smooth wartime routine. During the first few days of the war, everyone at Doha had worn their chemical suits and carried their gas masks; now the soldiers and Marines had the suits and the gas masks with them but were not wearing them. CFLCC's battle update assessment, which was “the” daily brief in the ultramodern command center, on 27 March, was no exception. It was chaired by General McKiernan, dressed as usual in his freshly starched desert battle dress uniform. The staff was moving crisply through its agenda when the alarm came from one of the air defense liaison officers: “Lightning, lightning, lightning!” which meant that an Iraqi missile launch had been detected and that the target was Kuwait. Everyone in the large amphitheater paused to put on their gas masks, which would have offered some protection in case of a chemical or biological strike, but none against the effects of high explosives. With his gas mask in place, General McKiernan went back to work, speaking through its mouthpiece, his voice calm and only slightly garbled. A few seconds later there were two deep detonations nearby, and then a third and maybe a fourth detonation, the sounds of two outgoing Patriot missiles and of at least one Patriot striking the incoming missile. Bits of debris rained down on Doha as the Giant Voice, for once, late, sounded the alarm. In the battle update assessment the gas masks stayed on for a few more minutes while experts tested for the effects of special weapons. Then it was back to business as usual, as if nothing had happened. But something

had happened. The incident was captured on Cable News Network (to be shown after the war in a documentary on CFLCC's “War Room”) and was analyzed and chewed over among the men and women at Doha for a few days. One German artillery officer, attached to C/JTF-CM, claimed to have learned from a good source that the Iraqi missiles fired at Kuwait had not been fired by a fire direction center; instead, the Iraqis were using a form of dead reckoning, calculating the distance and direction to a well-known target like Doha, and simply cranking in the right numbers. If so, they had done an excellent job. The computers at the Patriot missile battery showed that the trajectory of the missile, probably an “Ababil” missile, was such that it would have struck the command center itself or the building next door, which could have wiped out the CFLCC command group. That was not quite the end of it. In this war, neither CFLCC nor any other headquarters, especially in the rear, was a place where anyone showed much emotion of any kind. Maybe it was all the technology that made emotion seem out of place. Most soldiers and Marines were bone-tired, stretched close to their limits by impossibly long and stressful days. On the staffs, some never forgot that what they did, or did not do, could mean life or death for someone a few hundred miles away and pushed themselves even harder. But few ever seemed particularly happy or sad, except for the time when a few days later, during another battle update assessment, the officers in the command center offered the Patriot “missileers” a spontaneous round of applause.*

*MajGen Robert R. Blackman intvw, 31May03 (MCHC, Quantico, VA); Reynolds, Journal, entries for 27Mar-8Apr03; CNN Presents, “Inside the War Room” (Atlanta, GA: CNN DVD, 2003); Maj Robert K. Casey intvw, 27Apr03 (MCHC, Quantico, VA); Fontenot, et al., *On Point*, p. 98; Franks, *American Soldier*, pp. 506-507.



DVIC DM-SD-04-06145

Cpl Alvin Hicks of Marine Wing Support Squadron 373's bulk fuel section refuels an AH-1W Cobra helicopter gunship from the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing's forward refueling point on Jalibah Air Base, Iraq.

face of] . . . the unconventional threat along the . . . MSRs [main supply routes].²⁷²

The bottom line is that despite some serious challenges, the Marines of the group and the logistics command consistently managed to keep supply ahead of demand on the battlefield and thereby enabled operational success.

That helps to explain why, for many Marines, what happened next was as unexpected as many of the other challenges in this campaign, CFLCC ordered a halt in the march toward Baghdad. According to the I MEF situation report for 27 March, it received a CFLCC order to halt the attack north and focus on securing its lines of communication. The force in turn passed the order to division. General Mattis “did not want the pause. Nothing was holding us up.” Moreover, he believed that his troops, especially 5th Marines in Hantush, were in an exposed position, and he did not want to leave them in what amounted to a holding pattern. As a result, he felt constrained to give “one of the toughest orders [he] . . . ever had to give to an assault battalion that had taken ground [and] lost men doing it.” He told them to withdraw to a more defensible position, which they did despite their infantryman’s “So, now what do they want us to

do?” reaction to an order that didn’t make sense to them.^{273*}

Underlying the order were CFLCC concerns about resupply, which had apparently percolated up from V Corps; during the sandstorm, some Army units had nearly exhausted their supplies. The obvious corollary was now, with the *Fedayeen* threat, who would protect the force’s ever-longer supply lines—the long, dusty, slow-moving convoys from Kuwait to the front lines? There may be some validity to the argument that this thinking had its roots in the various prewar discussions about a lengthy “operational pause” between the opening phase of the war and the fight for Baghdad in order to build up supplies and reinforcements. After the war, some Marine operators talked about a link between the prewar discussions and the wartime pause.²⁷⁴ While I MEF consistently opposed a lengthy operational pause and division opposed any kind of a pause, General Conway opted for the middle ground: a brief pause for I MEF to catch its breath, not to mention staying in synch with the Army corps on his flank, which

*A related issue was that Mattis wanted the Iraqis to continue to think he intended to come at Baghdad from Route 1. If they focused on Hantush, they might realize he was planning a lateral move before threatening the capital from the east.



DVIC DM-SI-05-04645

An aerial view of the base camp Task Force Tarawa established near An Nasiriyah in preparation for the attack toward the Iraqi capital following the pause.

was, after all, still the main effort. On 25 March, for example, he had discussed the situation with his staff, saying that the enemy attacks “will effect . . . our CSS convoys. These huge long supply lines are a problem. . . . Rear area security continues to increase in importance. . . . You might need to look at pulling combat power in order to secure the key areas.”^{275*}

One of the threshold issues was just how long the pause would last, and what effect it would have on the plan. On 28 March, General McKiernan flew from his headquarters in Kuwait to Jalibah, because he wanted to meet face-to-face with his two corps commanders, Generals Conway and Wallace, to discuss the situation and its implications for the upcoming attack on Baghdad, the next phase of the war. For General McKiernan, two enemy centers of gravity were now Baghdad and the Iraqi paramilitary forces, which could impede further progress to the north.

Accounts of the conference vary somewhat, but

*The Marine general speaking out against the pause was Gen Mattis. Gen Conway also discussed the issue during an interview for the History Channel series on the Iraq War (released in 2003), saying he had welcomed the opportunity to do some consolidating and resupplying. *The Washington Post* reported a video teleconference on 25 March among Gens McKiernan, Wallace, and Conway, with McKiernan soliciting recommendations, Wallace expressing concerns, and Conway wanting to continue on to Baghdad. There is a lengthy discussion of the “pause” in West and Smith, *March Up*, which conveys a picture of hard-charging Marines being held back because the Army was worried about its supply lines. (Rick Atkinson, Peter Baker, and Thomas E. Ricks, “Confused Start, Decisive End,” *The Washington Post*, 13Apr03, p. A-1; Bing West and MajGen Ray L. Smith, *The March Up* [New York, NY: Putnam, 2003], pp. 73, 84)

there is general agreement that both commanders talked about the threats they wanted to address before moving closer to Baghdad.²⁷⁶ Wallace said he needed time to position his corps. Conway mentioned what sounded like tasks he wanted to accomplish before the attack on Baghdad: I MEF was committed to “a systematic reduction of the bad guys in An Nasiriyah,” a reference to the ongoing fight for that city to secure I MEF’s rear; the British division needed to execute some “pinpoint armor strikes,” that is, raids into Basrah. Referring to RCT 1, he commented that “Joe Dowdy was in a 270-degree fight” on Highway 7 as his command made its way north through the heart of the country, occasionally encountering stiff resistance. General Conway later remembered making the case for a pause of approximately three days.

The upshot of the conference was a relatively open-ended decision by McKiernan for both I MEF and V Corps to “take time to clean up . . . before we commit . . . to the Baghdad fight, because once we commit to the Baghdad fight, we cannot stop.”²⁷⁷ There would be a pause, a chance for securing the rear areas and for supplies to catch up, which, if all went well, would be relatively short, no more than “several days.” It would not be a lengthy operational pause to wait for heavy reinforcements, and it would not keep CFLCC from the main event. When he spoke to his staff later on the same day, General Conway downplayed the pause and stressed that the focus remained on Baghdad.²⁷⁸

As the operational pause began, I MEF shifted its



Photo courtesy of CFLCC

LtGen James T. Conway, left, and MajGen James N. Mattis discuss preparations for the final phase of the war. The capture of Baghdad would not mean an end to hostilities but a shift to a post-war phase.

focus somewhat, attacking pockets of resistance in its area of operations while keeping its eye on the ultimate goal. Fragmentary Order 040-03 outlined the missions of defeating “paramilitary forces in zone [in order to] protect MEF lines of communication and set conditions for continued attacks north to defeat the Baghdad and Al Nida [*Republican Guard*] divisions.”²⁷⁹ General Conway and his staff seem to have made it a point even to avoid the word “pause”; they preferred to talk about “throwing elbows” in a different direction. When on Saturday, 29 March, the

general quipped, “Enjoy your Saturday night, kick back and relax, and we will tell you when the war starts back up again,” he did not intend for anyone to take him seriously.²⁸⁰ Nor did he want anyone to think I MEF had shifted to conducting counter guerrilla operations. In his view, I MEF was simply “re-cocking” for the next phase: attacking pockets of enemy resistance, shoring up logistics bases, building air bases, giving the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing time to conduct the “shaping” operations that had not been possible earlier. As General Conway remarked on 30

The Battle of the Icons

The 3d Marine Aircraft Wing’s “kinetic” and “non-kinetic” effects, shorthand for bombs and leaflets, on the Iraqi *10th Armored Division* were so powerful that it was soon little more than an icon on U.S. computer screens. I Marine Expeditionary Force had monitored the situation and was satisfied that the *10th* was no longer a threat, but the icons worried higher headquarters, perhaps even someone at the Pentagon, and the order eventually came down from CFLCC for I MEF to “neutralize” that division. And so, in early April, General Conway directed General Natonski to either capture or destroy its remnants. Task Force

Tarawa put together a smaller task force from 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and the 24th MEU (SOC), which advanced some 300 kilometers across Iraq in short order, no small feat in itself, and, though prepared for heavy fighting, found nothing but cheering crowds when they drove into the flat, dusty town of Al Amarah on the Tigris. The attack spanned 8-10 April.*

*Col Jeffrey Acosta, “OIF Field History Journal,” 2003, entry for 20May03 (MCHC, Quantico, VA); 2d MEB ComdC, Jan-Jun03 (GRC, Quantico, VA); Michael Wilson, “Two Marine Battalions Turn to Confront the Remnants of a Lurking Iraqi Division,” *The New York Times*, 8Apr03, p. B-8.

May, “while we were stationary [on the ground], we were in fact attacking with our air,” putting out 300 to 320 sorties per day on the enemy.²⁸¹ The *Baghdad Division*, arrayed around Al Kut, received constant pressure from the wing, as did the *10th Armored Division* to the south in the vicinity of Al Amarah. Both were ultimately degraded virtually to the point of ineffectiveness by the air attacks.

The 1st Marine Division did not hide its impatience to move on toward Baghdad. Again and again, in its formal and informal communications, it spread the message that it was “anxious to resume the attack . . . [because] the best way to secure our locs [lines of communication] is to rapidly move n[orth] to collapse the regime.”²⁸² General Mattis himself penned the comment on 29 March that he was “convinced that the enemy situation is such that we could cross the Tigris and destroy the *Baghdad Division* without interference from the *10th Armored Division* within the next 72 hours.”²⁸³ General Conway was only slightly less forward-leaning, reporting on 30 March that “the conditions for attacking north are rapidly being set and should be in place within 2-3 days.” It was his view that I MEF had nearly all the supplies it needed to move forward, and he was hearing that after the continuous air attacks, the enemy simply was not there in large numbers.²⁸⁴

On 30 March, General Mattis flew to Jalibah to meet with General Conway and outline his plan for getting things moving again. General Mattis found that he was preaching to the choir, I MEF planners being just as eager as he was. General Conway

In the forward command post a few miles south of Ad Diwaniyah, MajGen James N. Mattis, left, meets with the commanding general of the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing, MajGen James F. Amos, to discuss air support for the upcoming offensive.

Photo courtesy of Col Charles J. Quilter II



agreed that the security situation would allow the division to proceed with its plan for a limited objective attack across the Tigris to isolate Al Kut, which in turn would open up a number of further options for both the 1st Marine Division and I MEF. This was true even though Conway believed that Saddam would order an attack by weapons of mass destruction once the Marines reached Al Kut. Chemical warfare “attack likely when attacks on Baghdad resume” were the words of I MEF’s situation report for 28 March. “Trigger depends on U.S. success against . . . forces [in the vicinity of] Al Kut.”²⁸⁵

The I MEF plans were not just about the 1st Marine Division. Task Force Tarawa’s status was especially important, since once An Nasiriyah was secure the task force was to “expand its battle space to the north” along Routes 1 and 7 to guard the division’s rear as it moved farther north. Between 1 and 6 April, Tarawa focused RCT 2 on this task while continuing its increasingly successful “three block war” in An Nasiriyah—that is, the mix of combat patrols and civil affairs work that was required after the major battles had been fought. Task Force Tarawa had been augmented by 15th MEU (SOC) and 2d Battalion, 25th Marines, which assumed joint responsibility for An Nasiriyah, freeing RCT 2 to operate to the north.²⁸⁶

During the preparations for the final phase of the war, the 1st Marine Division and the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing continued to place a premium on face-to-face meetings. The meeting between Generals Amos and Mattis on 31 March is representative. On that morning, General Amos, the former fighter pilot, flew himself and a few members of his staff in a CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter from Kuwait to the division’s forward command post alongside Highway 1, a few miles south of Ad Diwaniyah in the center of southern Iraq. Even though the visibility was still poor, and the desert below largely featureless for long stretches, the general flew at about 100 feet on account of the surface-to-air missile threat. It was an exhausting six-hour round trip.

General Mattis met the helicopter when it landed and walked his guests to the command post, which was little more than a few tents and camouflage netting. He began by praising the wing for its support, especially for flying unmanned aerial reconnaissance vehicles for the division. This was like having a small television camera in the sky to scout the terrain just ahead, which, together with the high-flying Navy P-3 Orions that General Mattis had arranged for, delivered an excellent picture of the battlefield. The generals then discussed the upcoming offensive, with General Mattis describing his plan and asking for



Photo courtesy of CFLCC

A burning Iraqi T55 tank, destroyed by the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, sits along Highway 27 north of An Nu-maniyah, the site of an enemy military compound.

more support from the wing. Two issues stood out: one was bridging the canals and rivers that stood between the division and Baghdad; the other was resupply. Since the 1st Service Support Group's convoys had to drive literally hundreds of miles to reach the front, the obvious alternative was for the wing to airlift supplies when shortages loomed.

After two hours of talks, General Amos and his staff flew up to Hantush to personally evaluate the suitability of a field-expedient "highway airstrip" for Marine cargo planes. General Mattis, who was immensely grateful for the wing's support and his good relationship with General Amos, quipped later that General Amos showed "more bravery than good judgment" when he flew himself on to Hantush. They "approached by circling over a large date palm grove [which later turned out to have contained enemy fighters] . . . and landed on the superhighway which was lined with [the] vehicles of the 5th Marines," who had moved back into the area a few hours earlier. Amos found the 8,000-foot runway suitable for his pilots even though it was little more than a four-lane highway from which the Marines had recently removed the centerline traffic dividers.²⁸⁷ That night, flights of heavily loaded KC-130s Hercules aircraft landed at Hantush using night-vision goggles. The division later described Hantush as a "critical logistics hub" for the final push north. Finally, before returning to his headquarters in Kuwait, General Amos stopped briefly at I MEF's forward command post in Jalibah to touch base with General Conway.²⁸⁸

Writing about the meeting, one of the officers in General Amos's party, field historian Colonel Charles J. Quilter II, observed how much things had changed since Desert Storm, especially in terms of communications between the actuals: "There was the twice daily . . . video teleconference. They also talked on the phone a lot. That really struck me. Compared to Desert Storm . . . they talked far more than their predecessors [in that conflict]. . . . [They] often talked late . . . [into the night] about . . . the latest developments and what kind of air support the division would need the next day. . . . They were called the 'Talking Jims' by their staffs."²⁸⁹

The expeditionary force resumed the offensive to the north on 1 April. With RCT 7 following in trace, RCT 5 advanced northeast along Route 27, seizing a bridge over the Saddam Canal, a continuation of the north-south waterway the Marines had encountered near An Nasiriyah. The next day, RCT 5 seized two crossings over the Tigris, putting it astride a major route that ran between Baghdad and the city of Al Kut, where the British had suffered a disastrous defeat against the Turks in 1916 during World War I. This enabled the division to complete the destruction, in the vicinity of Al Kut, of the *Baghdad Division*, which RCT 1 had fixed in place by advancing from the south, thereby putting it at the mercy of RCT 7 advancing from the northwest. The division history records 3 April as the day RCT 7 destroyed the enemy division's two western brigades.²⁹⁰

General Mattis made a point of keeping his troops

from actually going into the city of Al Kut; he did not want to become bogged down in urban combat, and he did not want to assume the responsibility for governing the city, which he could incur under the "Law of War" if he entered the city limits. When he was content that the enemy was surrounded, largely combat ineffective and unlikely to attack, he left Al Kut to its own devices, posting a recon battalion outside the town to make sure the Iraqi commander did not "get brave."²⁹¹ The division was now free to turn its attention to Baghdad.

It was in the wake of this attack that General Mattis, in a move that attracted considerable attention and stirred some controversy, relieved Colonel Dowdy as the commanding officer of 1st Marines and replaced him with his operations officer, Colonel John A. Toolan. (Generals Conway and Mattis discussed the relief before it occurred.) Colonel Dowdy, a well-respected Marine who placed a premium on the well-being of his Marines, apparently fell victim to the general's overriding quest for speed. The division spokesman said, simply, "It was a decision based on operating tempo." On 4 April, in a tent at

the division's command post, there was a difficult meeting between General Mattis and his assistant division commander, Brigadier General Kelly, on the one hand, and Colonel Dowdy on the other. Dowdy stood on the record of his Marines, who had been fighting their way up-country and getting the job done, perhaps not as quickly as Mattis and Kelly wanted. According to Dowdy's account of the meeting, Mattis told the colonel he was being relieved and asked him to empty his sidearm and turn over his ammunition, which Dowdy said would not be necessary. Before long, Dowdy was on a helicopter to Kuwait. A considerate man not given to undermining his brother officers, Colonel Toolan had not known what was coming but obeyed the order to replace Dowdy. When he arrived at the regiment, he let it be known that he would carry on where his predecessor had left off, that the regiment was bigger than any one man. Colonel Dowdy could not have agreed more, posting a message on an internet website saying he remained loyal to the division and its leaders. He spent the rest of the war serving as an aerial observer in one of the P-3s flying over the battlefield.²⁹²

Chapter 7

Baghdad: Going Down Fast, Going Down Final

The mantra had always been, Baghdad is the enemy's center of gravity; the purpose of the campaign is to remove the regime, the means to that end is capturing Baghdad. It was where Saddam's power resided, both symbolically and otherwise. CentCom and its subordinates were consistent in their assumption that Saddam had to defend the capital. While he had stationed relatively weak regular army divisions in the south, Saddam had kept his best forces around Baghdad, the *Republican Guard* and the *Special Republican Guard*. The thinking was still that the Iraqis would set up concentric rings of defense around Baghdad. Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) maps showed a ring around Baghdad and an area labeled the "Red Zone." The deeper the U.S. forces penetrated into the Red Zone, which took in Al Kut in the east and Karbala in the west, the tougher the fight would become. Supported by fanatic militiamen, retreating Iraqi forces would make their last stand in and around the capital.* The Red Zone also was where Saddam Hussein was most likely to order the use of weapons of mass destruction, especially if the fight went badly for him and he had little or nothing left to lose by way of international support. He would, presumably, prefer to stop the Coalition with the weapons outside his capital. But with Saddam Hussein, who could be sure what the plan was?

Since Baghdad was the one city that CFLCC could not bypass, the question, as early as the summer of 2002, was how best to attack it and turn the nightmares, if not into pleasant dreams, at least into tolerable slices of reality. The V Corps and CFLCC planners, including Colonel Kevin Benson, the plans officer who had solid relations with I MEF planners,

took the approach described as "systems-based planning," which had grown out of the work of some very good military theorists at the Army's School of Advanced Military Studies, the Marine Corps University, and the Warfighting Laboratory at Marine Corps Combat Development Command in Quantico. Soon these theorists engaged I MEF planners, who made a contribution of their own, and learned an approach that the Marines could adapt to fit their plans. The idea was to think of a city as a system or, better yet, as a system of systems. On the one hand were the systems used by the regime to control the city, the other kind of "power points" such as the police and the military or the government-run media, not to mention symbols of power such as palaces. On the other hand were the systems that made the city run—water, electricity, and transportation. There was of course some overlap between the two categories. An airport, for example, could fit into two or three categories. By analyzing a city, planners could map the relationships between systems and identify the "key nodes." These could be attacked with precision-guided weapons from the air or with raids on the ground. Then there would be no need for costly house-to-house, block-to-block fighting, let alone the wholesale destruction of the infrastructure, which the Coalition wanted to preserve for the postwar phase.²⁹³

To turn theory into practice, conferences and seminars on urban warfare were held in late 2002, like the ones at CFLCC in Kuwait in December.²⁹⁴ The Army, and CFLCC, came to favor a concept of operations with two basic steps. The first was encircling and isolating Baghdad. This would prevent reinforcements from entering the city and keep prominent members of the regime, especially Saddam Hussein and his sons, from escaping. The second step was to establish bases outside the city limits and then conduct "in and out" armored raids to attrite the enemy. Supported by attack helicopters, with fixed-wing support on station nearby, the raiders would identify points of resistance, hit them "hard and quick," then get out or simply advance along a particular axis and destroy whatever opposition presented itself. In December 2002 General David McKiernan summed up the plan as one to "isolate

*There might even be scenes like that portrayed in the movie *Blackhawk Down*, about U.S. soldiers mired in a fight in 1993 in downtown Mogadishu, where U.S. technology was hard put to overcome paramilitary fighters in a warren of alleyways and ruined buildings. It was the kind of place where helicopters became vulnerable to rocket-propelled grenades fired by young men and little boys, and elite troops lost their way and their lives. The vivid images from that movie, based on the gripping and carefully researched book by journalist Mark Bowden, were familiar to virtually every American soldier and Marine in the Iraq War. Those images were the stuff of nightmares for planners and commanders.

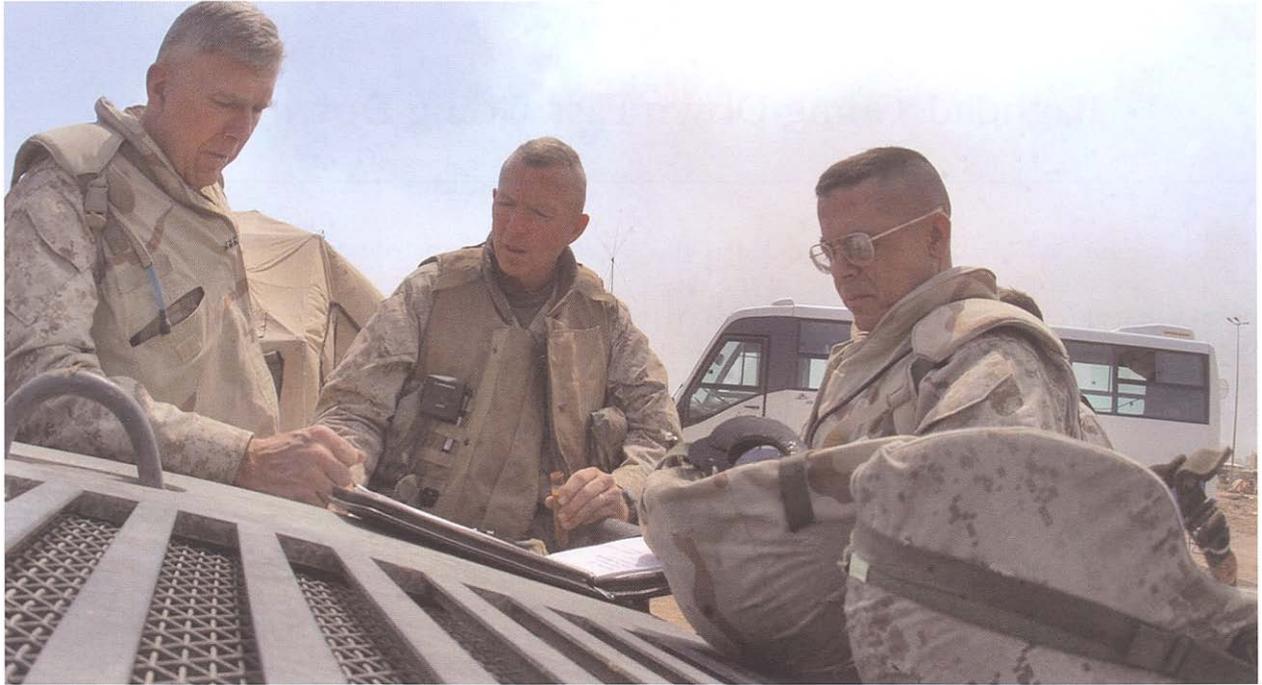


Photo courtesy of Defend America

LTGen James T. Conway, left, Col Steven A. Hummer, center, the 7th Marines' commanding officer, and Col Larry K. Brown, operations officer for I Marine Expeditionary Force, meet to discuss the Baghdad offensive.

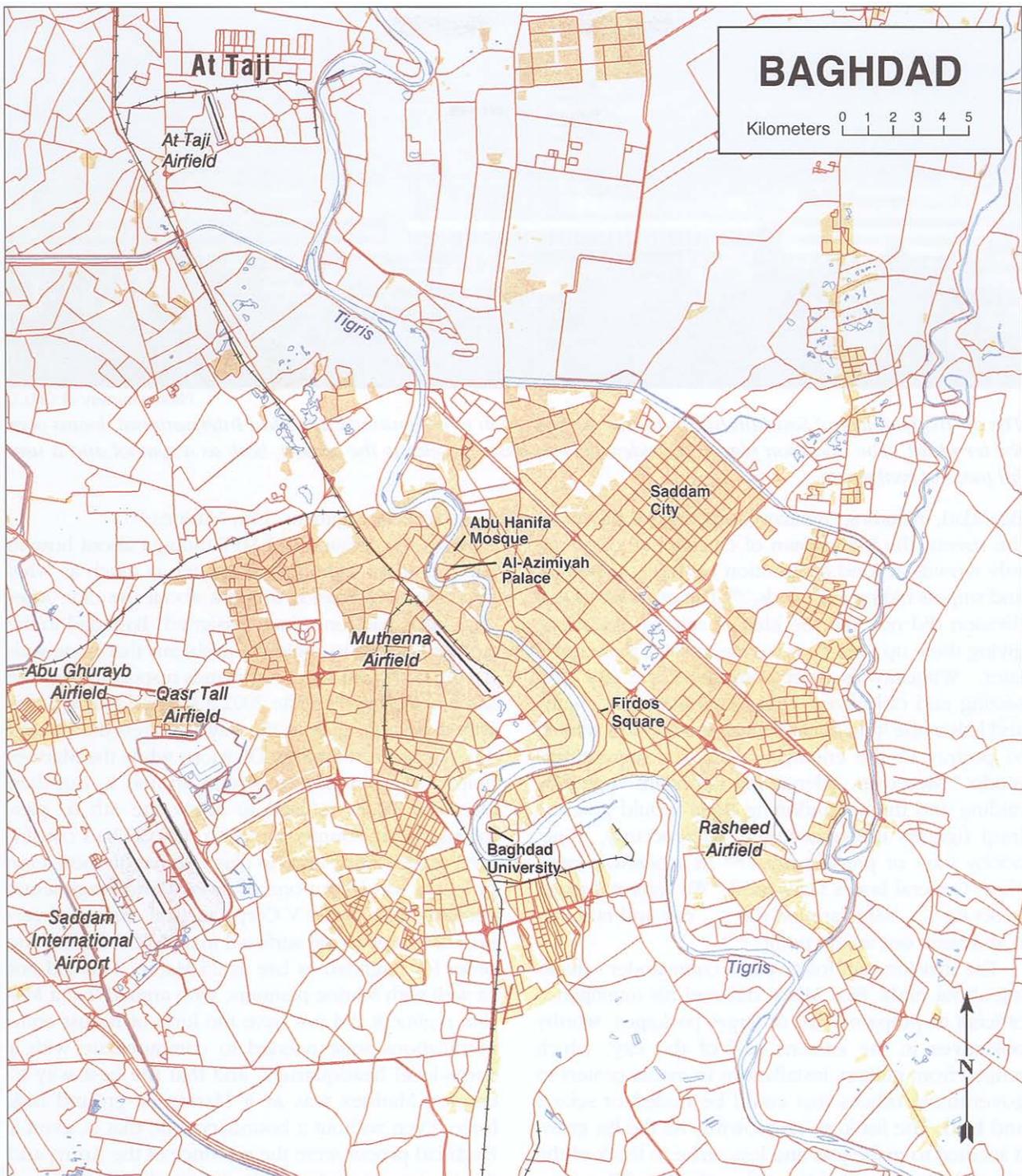
Baghdad, establish an outer cordon which controls movement in and out of the city, and then a series of forward operating bases . . . to . . . attack . . . specific targets in the city [and return to base,] . . . or [to] seize and secure specific targets." The process, which could be lengthy, would continue until the enemy was too weak to oppose an occupation.^{295*}

The CFLCC plan made sense for a force made up of mechanized infantry; the 3d Infantry Division, for example, had many tactical vehicles at its disposal, but surprisingly few "dismounts"—1,200 to 1,600—infantrymen who were trained to fight on foot. Baghdad was an open city in the sense of having broad boulevards leading in and out of town that were not too bad for armor. This made for an exception to the Army's doctrinal reluctance to use heavy armor in urban areas. The Army had tried the concept on a limited scale in the city of Najaf on the way to Baghdad, and the results were not inconsistent with the British example in Basrah. From their base at the air-

port outside the city, the UK division was staging carefully planned raids against specific targets. Intelligence collection on the streets of Basrah drove some of the targeting, a modus operandi that the British had learned the hard way in Northern Ireland over the preceding thirty years. Compared to the Americans, the British tended to use less armor and more infantry, and to drop off snipers and spotters when the main body withdrew. By early April, they appeared to be enjoying a modicum of success.²⁹⁶ Their success was contrasted with perceptions of Marine problems in An Nasiriyah. The comparison was not apt, as the goals of the two operations were different. The Marines needed to go into An Nasiriyah to get to the other side of the river in a hurry, while the British goal was to secure Basrah when the time was right. But at least for some, the perception was there. Planners at various Army, Marine, and joint headquarters were aware of what was happening in Basrah, and while it is impossible to pinpoint an instance when anyone copied a particular British tactic, the British approach seemed to confirm some of what the planners had been saying about urban tactics.²⁹⁷

The 1st Marine Division concept was different both from the CFLCC/Army concept and from the British concept, not surprisingly, since it was a more traditional infantry division, with some 6,000 rifle-

*Rick Atkinson in his book, *In the Company of Soldiers*, notes that this was a departure from the Army's reluctance to commit armor to an urban area and he also notes Gen Wallace's preference for staying out of the cities and defeating the Iraqi Army and the regime on other ground. This was obviously a minority opinion. Some Army planners believed the in-and-out raids could take weeks. (Atkinson, *In the Company of Soldiers*, pp. 185-186, 218, 287-288)



men. As early as 1999, the Corps' Warfighting Laboratory had used division forces to run the "Urban Warrior Advanced Warfighting Experiment," exploring some of the problems Marines would face in cities in the 21st century. In California, in December 2002, division had conducted its own seminars and training on urban warfare, spending three days talking about how it would fight in Baghdad. Among the

attendees were representatives of the Warfighting Laboratory, Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron (the Marine equivalent of the legendary Navy's "Top Gun" School), I MEF, and the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing. The seminar was followed by an "Urban Combined Arms Exercise" at the abandoned airbase at Victorville. The exercise ran two battalions through the kinds of challenges they might face in



Photo courtesy of CFLCC

The air traffic tower of Saddam International Airport, soon to be renamed Baghdad International, looms over the terminal. The Coalition placed considerable emphasis on seizing the airport, both as a symbol and a useful piece of real estate.

Baghdad, including “militias competing for power on the streets, the breakdown of civilian authority, unruly crowds at food distribution centers, car bombs, and snipers hiding in crowds.”²⁹⁸ The upshot was that division did not like the idea of seizing objectives, giving them up, and then having to seize them again later. “Withdrawals from portions of the city after seizing raid objectives would embolden the enemy and lessen the ‘dominating effect’ the division wanted to portray to the enemy and to the international media.” Moreover, “identifying important targets by raiding and then abandoning them would give the Iraqi fighters the opportunity to reoccupy, mine, booby trap, or preplan fires.”²⁹⁹ In a postwar interview, General James Mattis said: “We were not eager to set up . . . bases around the . . . city and raid into it and back out at any point.”^{300*}

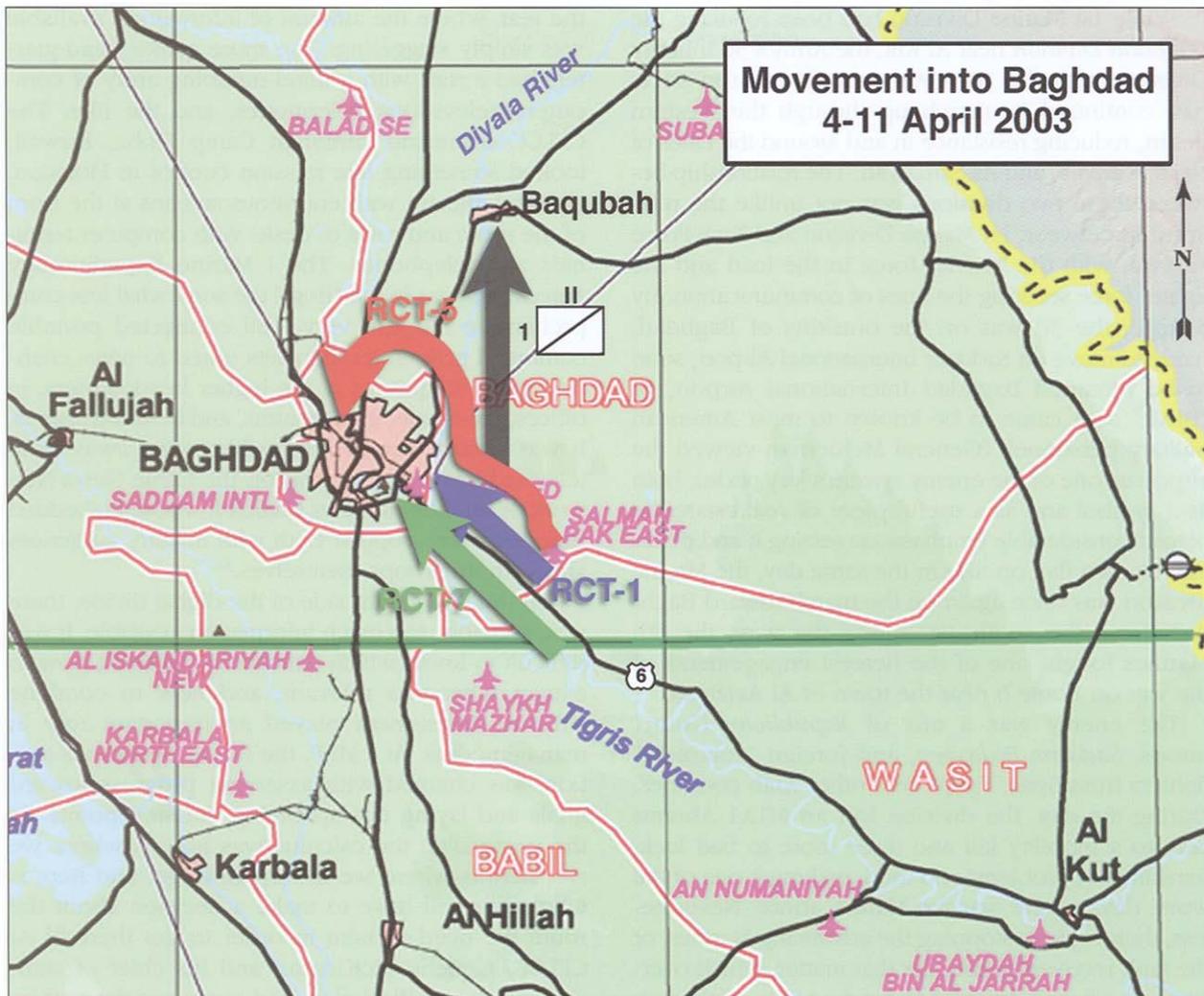
The division staff followed its commander’s thinking about raids. First Mattis directed his intelligence officers to prepare a list of target packages, worthy objectives in the eastern half of the city, which ranged from military installations to media centers to government offices that could be raided or seized and held. The list kept on growing. As the list grew, it seemed to make less and less sense to think of the operation in terms of “in-and-out” raids. Why seize one site and then give it up only to return the next day to seize a nearby site? Ultimately, the division began to consider breaking the city into zones and assigning them to the maneuver regiments, and even

*This was not only division policy, but it was also the conviction of at least one regimental commander, Col Steven Hummer of 7th Marines, who did not want to withdraw from hard-won gains. (Col Steven A. Hummer intvw, 13Feb04 [MCHC, Quantico, VA])

to its artillery regiment, 11th Marines.³⁰¹

What the division or I MEF thought about how to run the urban fight did not matter as much as what two other commands thought about the city. After all, CFLCC had long since “assigned” Baghdad to the Army’s V Corps to avoid the problems that came with having two corps-level commands responsible for the same objective.³⁰² In late 2002 it seemed that V Corps would be able to split the city between the 3d and 4th Mechanized Infantry Divisions while the Marines helped to maintain the cordon around it. But then after the Turks refused to allow the 4th to pass through their country into Iraq, CFLCC had considered using Marine units in place of that division. One proposal was to put one or more Marine regimental combat teams under V Corps’ tactical control. A version of this proposal surfaced in a CFLCC draft of the order for Baghdad as late as 25 March. This did not sit well with Marine planners, who argued that a Marine regiment did not have the kind of robust communications suite needed to communicate with a corps-level headquarters, and that the best way to employ Marines was as a Marine air-ground task force. Even without a boundary shift, that is, even if Baghdad proper were the province of the Army, and the Marines stayed outside the city limits, an intact air-ground task force could support V Corps more effectively, especially if given some latitude to control its own operations. “How to fight the MAGTF” was one lesson that seemed to be on the curriculum every semester.³⁰³

General McKiernan gave fair consideration to General James Conway’s arguments but did not come to a final decision about Baghdad before G-Day.



McKiernan had approved a branch plan to bring forces into Baghdad from both I MEF and V Corps if it made sense to do so.³⁰⁴ Earlier, he had said, “[I]f there is a decision . . . about introducing I MEF forces into Baghdad . . . I will establish the boundary . . . [which] would logically be . . . the Tigris.” The assumption was clearly that I MEF would come from the east and V Corps from the west.³⁰⁵ In the words of Marine planners, even after “the battle [for Iraq] began, the issue continued to evolve, and, as the Coalition neared Baghdad, the decision was made to [ap]portion the city along the Tigris River,” assigning the eastern half of the city to the Marines.³⁰⁶

It appears that General McKiernan made that decision in early April when the “Baghdad fight” was finally taking shape, and he was ready to predict that the regime was “going down fast, going down final.” By 3 April, his staff had issued CFLCC Fragmentary Order 124, which delineated the boundary between I

MEF and V Corps. This would, McKiernan emphasized, be a “coordinated two-direction attack with I MEF attacking to seize [an intermediate objective] . . . and then beginning to work into Baghdad from the southeast.”³⁰⁷

Was it a last-minute decision, one that had to be made earlier than expected? The watchword for the campaign had always been speed. Few had thought that CFLCC troops would be on the outskirts of Baghdad in early April. Even a forward-leaning officer like General James Amos thought it would take some 55 days just to get to Baghdad.³⁰⁸ Did the quick tempo outstrip prewar plans or, more precisely, the planning process? This was an issue that General McKiernan had been thinking about for months. He had a base plan, one with branches, designed to allow him the flexibility to change circumstances that no one could predict in advance. In that sense, everything was going according to plan.